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This dissertation, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the College of Graduate and Professional Studies of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

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October 10, 2019

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School of Educational Leadership

Principal Retention: Why Leaders Stay

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Carrie Parker

November 2019

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to school principals. Their work is hard. Principals balance many things while meeting the demands of leading a campus and staying focused on improving student outcomes. Thank you for your dedication to making life better for the students in your care. Your effort does not go unnoticed. Be encouraged; you are making a difference!

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my deepest thanks to my family. My husband, Adam, has been my biggest cheerleader throughout this entire experience. I know it has not been easy to balance one more thing in our lives, but I will be forever grateful for your support with obtaining this degree and all of my professional aspirations. Thank you for believing in me. I love you and am truly blessed to be married to you. To my kids, Bailey, Bevin, and Brock, thank you for your patience and understanding when I was doing homework, writing, and reading. You motivate me to want to be better and do better every day. I am honored to be your mom and love you very much. To my friend and colleague, Jo-Lynette Crayton, thank you for having confidence in me even when I did not. Thank you for listening to every reason why I could not get this degree but demanding me to finish it anyway. Your encouragement helped push me over the finish line. To Dr. Mary Diez, thank you for helping me overcome the vulnerabilities of being my own worst critic and fine tuning my work to make it the best product it could be. To my dissertation chair, Dr. John Kellmayer, thank you for your commitment and consideration in helping me complete this project. From my early ideas to submitting my final copy, I have appreciated your insight.

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Abstract

This study addressed the problem of principal retention. The purpose of this study was to determine the factors that influenced elementary principals to remain in the position and the factors that influenced incumbent principals to leave the elementary principalship. This qualitative case study used data from one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions, and student demographic data from the campuses represented to determine the factors that best influence retention. The sample population was 10 principals from 3 districts in Central Texas; 6 elementary school principals that continued to serve for 5 or more years and 4 incumbent principals that left the elementary principalship in the last 2 years. The researcher used the interview transcripts to code data, establish categories, and then create themes from the patterns of ideas that emerged from the categories. The findings indicated that leadership beliefs, giving and getting support, and sharing complex job responsibilities were the most influential factors regarding principal retention. The findings indicated that school districts should consider helping principals understand and implement shared leadership practices in their schools. The findings suggested that school district administrators help principals to continuously reflect on their leadership beliefs and reinforce their motivations to lead with the values and beliefs of the districts' leaders. In this study, the researcher attempted to add to what is known about the factors that contribute to principal retention so that principal retention is maximized for the future.

Keywords: principal retention, school leadership, leadership beliefs, shared leadership, distributed leadership

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It takes five to seven years for school principals in the United States to have adequate time to build the trust necessary to create and sustain organizational conditions that help teachers feel competent, autonomous, and relatable in securing their tenure on campus (Hochbein & Cunningham, 2013; Kokka, 2016; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). School leaders indirectly affect student achievement through their influence on people, the purposes and goals of the school, school structures and social networks, and organizational culture around curriculum, instruction, and discipline (Coelli & Green, 2012; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Fuller & Young, 2009). High levels of principal turnover can disrupt the school's effort to enhance student outcomes through interactions with teachers over time (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). However, there is limited research on principal retention to identify why leaders continue to do their work or remain in the position so that leadership retention is maximized. This study is therefore designed to identify factors that influence elementary principals to remain in the position through a case study analysis of elementary principals who have served for at least five years or who have left the elementary principalship within the last two years.

Background

Effective school leadership "enhances student achievement and other desirable outcomes" (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 533). This is critical because effective principals leverage ways to improve teaching and learning by influencing teacher beliefs about teaching and learning (Brown, 2016). Lasting school improvement requires moving beyond the initiation and early implementation stages of change, which makes the work complex and time consuming (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). However, school improvement has been hindered by the negative impacts of continuous principal turnover on student achievement, school sustainability, and leadership shortages. For example, Béteille, Kalogrides, and Loeb (2012) suggested that frequent principal

turnover results in lower teacher retention and lower student achievement. Mascall and Leithwood (2010) also identified a vicious cycle in low-achieving schools due to principals leaving quickly because of the challenges that accompany such schools and who are then replaced by leaders who may not be qualified or are not committed to the needs of the school. When the continuity of organizational focus and effort in building trusting relationships between stakeholders is interrupted by leadership changes, schools cannot continuously improve (Tran, 2017). In fact, it has been found that "schools led by fewer principals during a 10-year period out performed schools that had experienced greater principal turnover" (Huff et al., 2011, p. 76). Principals sometimes leave the profession because of how the role has changed.

Changes in the principal's role materialized after a report titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* was released by the National Commission on excellence in Education in 1983. The report warned of "a rising tide of mediocrity" in schools and cited high levels of illiteracy, poor performance on international comparisons, and a decline in SAT scores from 1963 to 1980 (as cited in Mehta, 2015, p. 19). The report called for an improved curriculum, extended school hours, higher standards for becoming a teacher, and greater responsibility on schools themselves to enforce new expectations (Mehta, 2015). *A Nation at Risk* has had a major impact on how the federal government influences public education and has contributed to current educational processes and practices nationwide, including the expectations of school principals (Hewitt, 2008). Changes in the principal's role and continuous turnover impacts principal retention.

Statement of the Problem

Principal retention is an ongoing challenge for school districts around the United States (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). For example, the National Center for Education Statistics (Goldring & Taie, 2018) reported that approximately 10,342 more public school principals left

the field in 2016–2017 as compared to the school year before. Goldring & Taie (2018) reported that this problem was more severe at charter schools, which, in the 2016–2017 school year, had the highest principal turnover rate at 17% versus 11% for public schools. Overall, the highest percentage of principals left schools in rural areas with 100 or fewer students or where schools had at least 75% of students approved for free or reduced lunch (Goldring & Taie, 2018).

In Texas, the average tenure of elementary principals from 1996 through 2008 was almost five years, but about four years for high school principals. Only 39% of the school leaders remained at their school after five years and about 90% of principals leaving a school moved from leadership positions altogether (Fuller & Young, 2010).

There were a variety of reasons why principals were leaving the field. They included accountability pressures (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013), complexity of the job (Mehta, 2015), lack of support (Hansen, 2018), and compensation (Tran, 2017). Principals had a variety of pressing responsibilities including personnel issues, student discipline, parent concerns, community perceptions, and ensuring academic success for all students (Huff et al., 2011). The role of principal has continued to change because of the increasing demands of school accountability across the nation and the focus on principals making a more direct impact on student achievement (Brown, 2016, p. 101).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research case study was to investigate principal retention from the perspective of elementary school principals. Case study research provides the researcher an opportunity "to develop an in-depth analysis of a case, often a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals" (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). The case study was conducted examining 10 elementary school principals who had served for a minimum of five years in the same school or who left the field within the last two years.

I collected data from three sources: (a) semistructured interviews with current and previous elementary school principals to provide personal perspectives about leadership, (b) focus group interviews with the same principal participants who viewed a Public Broadcasting Service broadcast about school leadership and discussed its contents via structured questions, and (c) student demographic data for comparison with participant feedback and to provide context for the principals' perspectives.

I analyzed responses from individual interviews and the focus group conversation along with student demographic information to determine how the leaders' experiences or practices affected principal retention, and to identify the factors that motivate leaders to stay so that school improvement could be maximized on a larger scale. Interviews with principals who had at least five years of experience at the same school were appropriate for investigating principal longevity because it aligned with current research on the time it takes for principals to positively impact student achievement. For example, Hull (2012), senior policy analyst for the Center for Public Education, reported that principals usually stayed at one school for three to four years but needed five to apply processes and practices that would sustain school improvement. Principals who served in a school for five to seven years maximized leverage in sustaining schools over time through distributed or responsible leadership practices (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Stone-Johnson, 2014). Such practices took time to establish and maintain so that school improvement could be realized.

This research regarding principal retention provides an understanding for why principals continue to serve in the field and, conversely, why they might leave the field. Interviews and conversations with leaders highlight specific leadership aspects that influence principals to remain leaders.

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer two primary research questions:

Q1. What were the primary factors that contributed to the decision of principals to remain in the principalship?

Q2. What were the primary factors that contributed to the decision of incumbent principals to leave the principalship?

Definition of Key Terms

Continuous improvement practices. Educational practices that promote working more efficiently and effectively to improve student achievement (Park, Hironaka, Carver, & Nordstrom, 2013).

Distributed leadership. School members, at all levels, becoming agents of change and taking ownership of school improvement efforts (Adams, Olsen, & Ware, 2017).

Free and reduced lunch program. Federally assisted meal program for students who are categorically eligible in other federal assistance programs (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2017).

Principal retention. The principal's consistent return to the same school or profession each year (Fuller & Young, 2009).

Principal turnover. One principal leaving a school and being replaced by a new principal (Cullen & Mazzeo, 2007).

Shared leadership theory. A leadership theory that emphasizes practices that promote a collective social process that occurs through the interactions of multiple people (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Used interchangeably with distributed leadership in research literature.

Summary

The loss of school principals from the field has been well-documented. Regardless of reason, principals have been leaving schools at noticeable rates and disrupting the sustained efforts of school improvement. It is important to understand what leadership aspects assist in principal retention because school leaders influence students and schools. Furthermore, it is crucial to gain a perspective for how aspects related to particular leadership practices impact student achievement and school sustainability. Thus, this study was designed to identify what principals think about leadership retention and the particular factors that affect their decision to remain in or exit the elementary principalship.

This paper is organized into five chapters. Chapter 2 includes a review of existing literature on principal attrition, principal retention, and why principals are leaving the field. Chapter 3 identifies the methodology used in the study. Chapter 4 contains the results and analysis of the results obtained from the study. Chapter 5 summarizes the research, the conclusion, and recommendations for future studies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Low principal retention has been an ongoing challenge for school districts across the United States (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). Research has indicated a variety of topics that contribute to principal retention and that are directly related to principal attrition. This review of literature presents findings explaining why principals leave the field and how it affects principal attrition, school sustainability, and student achievement. It provides an understanding of how principal retention is influenced by leadership practices while influencing student achievement and school culture. A conceptual framework about shared or distributed leadership helps connect the literature about principal attrition and retention and is also discussed in this chapter.

The literature included in this chapter was located using the electronic databases connected to the OneSearch and ProQuest search engines at the library of Abilene Christian University. Keywords and phrases used in the search were *principal retention*, *leadership retention*, *principal longevity*, *principal attrition*, and *principal turnover*.

The National Center for Education Statistics within the U.S. Department of Education reported that even with principals who remained in the field from the 2015–2016 school year to the 2016–2017 school year, 77% indicated that they would leave their current job for a higher paying job as soon as possible, and 76% stated they did not have the same enthusiasm for leading as they did when they started the position (Goldring & Taie, 2018).

At the state level, Fuller and Young (2010) reported the average tenure of elementary principals from 1996 through 2008 was almost five years and about four years for high school principals. Only 39% of school leaders remained at their school after five years in the position, and about 90% of principals leaving a school leave leadership positions altogether (SRI International, 2010).

Principals left the field for a variety of reasons, including accountability pressures (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013), complexity of the job (Mehta, 2015), lack of support (Hansen, 2018), and compensation (Tran, 2017). Principals had a variety of pressing responsibilities including personnel issues, student discipline, parent concerns, community perceptions, and ensuring academic success for students (Huff et al., 2011). The role of the principal has continued to change due to the increasing demands of school accountability nationwide and the focus on principals making a more direct impact on student achievement (Brown, 2016).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate principal retention from the perspective of elementary school principals and to identify what aspects influence leadership retention. A qualitative case study provided a "rich medium" for examining the human condition (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 146). A detailed literature review about principal retention connected the conceptual framework regarding shared or distributed leadership with the perspectives related to principal attrition and principal retention. Such background provided a landscape for further research about leadership practices that influenced leaders to remain in the field and impact principal retention.

Shared or Distributed Leadership

Shared or distributed leadership represent practices guiding how a principal chooses to lead all the constituents of the school community. I investigated if and how principal retention was impacted by leadership practices; many of which are related to shared or distributed leadership. The terms shared or distributed leadership have been used interchangeably in education; the definition below explains a common representation of shared leadership in schools:

> Shared leadership is the practice of governing a school by expanding the number of people involved in making important decisions related to the school's organization, operation, and academics. In general, shared leadership entails the creation of leadership

> roles or decision-making opportunities for teachers, staff members, students, parents, and community members. Shared leadership is widely seen as an alternative to more traditional forms of school governance in which the principal or administrative team exercises executive authority and makes most governance decisions without necessarily soliciting advice, feedback, or participation from others in the school or community. (Great Schools Partnership, 2014)

Publications related to shared or distributed leadership date back to the early 1980s; however, it was not until 2000 that Gronn outlined this form of leadership as a potential solution to the typical thinking that leadership was either about the individual (Bass, 1985) or a result of system designs and role structures (Jaques, 1989). Shared leadership reflects a change in focus from the attributes and behaviors of one single individual to a perspective where leadership is viewed as a collective social process emerging through the interactions of multiple people (Bolden, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). The theory of shared leadership includes the work of all individuals that have a part in leadership rather than those in formal roles in the "leader-plus" aspect (Bolden, 2011, p. 252). Regarding practice, shared leadership is a product of the interactions between leaders, followers, and their situations (Bolden, 2011).

Pearce and Conger (2003) presented a number of reasons why this shift was important to business-related leadership thinking in the mid-1990s, including the rise in cross-functional teams, the need for speedier delivery, the increased availability of information, and greater job complexity. This was also about the same time of increasing global dependence, which expedited the need to remain timely and competitive in larger markets (Lipman-Blumen, 1996). The ideals of shared or distributed leadership were seen as a network of interacting individuals that provide an openness to the boundaries of leadership while having a variety of expertise distributed across many, not just a few (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003). Theorists provided a range of frameworks related to shared or distributed leadership that were centered in systematic collaboration, intuitive working relationships, planful alignment of resources and responsibilities,

spontaneous alignment of tasks and functions, and a variety of leadership distributions based on the task's need and peoples' abilities to complete it (Gronn, 2000; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Bolden, 2011; Spillane, 2006). When done well, these frameworks gave an indication of the potential benefits to using shared or distributed leadership.

Similar benefits of shared or distributed leadership practices were applicable when applied to the school setting. When leadership roles were distributed throughout a school, a variety of outcomes resulted. Principals were able to prioritize leadership tasks over managerial ones while strengthening school support and solidarity among the variety of people sharing the responsibility (Fink, 2018; Great Schools Partnership, 2014). Shared leadership created reflection, communication, and a greater sense of ownership within staff through collaborative efforts (Great Schools Partnership, 2014). Teacher capacity and the collective efficacy of teachers grew as principals distributed leadership roles and tapped into the strengths of individuals to create better outcomes (Fink, 2018; Great Schools Partnership, 2014). Dumay, Boonen, and Van Damme (2013) suggested a tight alignment and ripple effect between principal leadership and teacher collaboration influencing teachers' collective efficacy beliefs that directly impacted student achievement. Thus, principals helped support the roles colleagues played in the formation of collective efficacy beliefs, or the group's shared beliefs toward accomplishing a goal (Dumay, et al., 2013). Distributed leadership reinforced a major driver for student success; school members at all levels became agents of change and took ownership of school improvement efforts (Adams et al., 2017).

Shared leadership is a distributed phenomenon impacted by social aspects and influences in the workplace, because the leader must focus on outcomes that result from group interactions versus the work of individuals (Velasco, Edmonson, & Slate, 2012). How principals distributed or shared leadership throughout the school could be a leadership practice that helped retain

principals, enhanced school culture, improved instruction, and increased student achievement (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). School principals who knew how to adapt their leadership styles benefited from using the most effective leadership behaviors to positively influence academic success (Velasco, et al., 2012). Effective principals knew that teachers needed to be involved in determining the best way to achieve school goals and they knew that their influence would strengthen collaboration among staff toward achieving those goals (Hardie, 2015). Practicing shared leadership helped principals be more effective in their work because they shared responsibilities among all stakeholders instead of taking all the pressure on themselves (Fink, 2018).

Principals needed five to seven years to build trusting relationships and fully share leadership roles that could serve as the foundation for continuous school improvement (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). These results strengthened the argument for protecting the time needed to build relationships and cultivate distributed or shared leadership. Rapid principal turnover resulted in backsliding where gains from collaborative efforts were dismissed (Hardie, 2015).

Research on Principal Attrition

Principal attrition has been getting additional attention considering continued educational reform efforts and the emphasis on school improvement overall. Unfortunately, principal attrition has been costly. Superville (2014) estimated the cost of replacing a school principal to be $75,000 for school districts around the nation. Boyce and Bowers (2016) categorized the likelihood of different principals leaving the field based on principal-level, school-level, or climate-level factors and found that principals could be pulled into other positions or pushed out of current ones. The pulls were typically positive, such as moving for increased pay, responsibilities, or benefits, whereas the pushes were considered negative, such as a result of conflict, politics, or poor working relationships (Boyce & Bowers, 2016). Principals' self-

perception of their leadership influence also affected their intentions to move or leave a school (Tekleselassie & Villareal, 2011). Satisfied principals perceived themselves with significantly higher levels of influence, lower levels of school climate problems, more positive attitudes about the principalship and their salary (Boyce & Bowers, 2016). Unsatisfied principals found hurdles in engaging in effective instructional leadership, stress and workload of the position, student discipline problems, and managing bureaucracy (Boyce & Bowers, 2016). In addition, federal, state, and local politics have affected leadership through increased accountability for educational processes and results (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013).

Legislation and accountability. In the 1970s, schools in the United States were "independent bureaucratic organizations" with little accountability (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013, p. 386). Within 10 years, states adopted minimum competency testing policies and states started regulating districts more heavily (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013). A report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education in 1983, called *A Nation at Risk*, put education in the spotlight and accelerated the need for education reform. It warned of "a rising tide of mediocrity" in schools and cited high levels of illiteracy, poor performance on international comparisons, and a decline in SAT scores from 1963 to 1980 (as cited in Mehta, 2015, p. 19). The report forecasted that for the first time in history, the educational skills of one generation would be less than the ones before it (Mehta, 2015). It convinced educational stakeholders that education efforts in the United States were in trouble and recommended improvements in content, expectations, time in school, and teaching (Hewitt, 2008). Furthermore, it called for national-level supervision at the campus level, holding individual schools responsible for enforcing new expectations (Mehta, 2015). Around the 1980s, 41 states started testing for accountability (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013). The top-down approach of accountability complicated the role of the principal, minimized teacher empowerment, and reduced the campus effort at affecting student outcomes. A *Nation at*

Risk had a major impact on the continuing development of federal influence and contributed to current educational processes and practices nationwide, including the expectations of school principals (Hewitt, 2008).

In 2009, the Obama administration spent over four billion dollars to transform some of the nation's worst schools (Béteille et al., 2012). Federal grants were often made available for schools needing intervention, but sweeping changes, like removing the principal and replacing the staff, have also been part of the conditions (Béteille et al., 2012). Chingos and West (2011) reported that due process protections and threats of litigation made it difficult to remove tenured teachers. Although principals were sometimes able to counsel ineffective teachers out of the profession, very few teachers were removed for poor performance (Chingos & West, 2011). Similar findings were true for principals.

The removal of an ineffective principal might seem beneficial to school improvement efforts; however, too much turnover creates instability, "loss of institutional memory," and an increase in training costs (Béteille et al., 2012, p. 905). Hochbein and Cunningham (2013) found that making a principal change did not "predispose a school for improving school performance" when investigating principal turnover related to school turnaround (p. 84). In fact, there were no substantial nor consistent gains in school performance after an incident of a principal change in 90 schools in a Midwestern metropolitan school district (Hochbein & Cunningham, 2013, p. 83). Principal mobility has been associated with higher teacher turnover and lower student achievement gains (Béteille et al., 2012). Ongoing turnover in a school made the position less attractive and minimized the chance of gaining a quality applicant. A vicious cycle of high turnover and poor performance made schools more vulnerable to the continued negative effects of principal turnover. Fuller and Young (2009) described how accountability was exacerbated by the pressure to significantly and quickly improve student achievement without the tools or time

to do so. Babo and Postma (2017) deemed the legislation related to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top, and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as unique burdens on U.S. principals that minimized the retention of principals for any considerable length of time.

Gonzalez and Firestone (2013) found that regardless of the external accountability placed on principals related to student achievement, nothing matched the personal accountability they placed on themselves for the responsibility they had over the children in their charge. Despite the increasing centralization of educational accountability for processes and outcomes from both the federal and state government, the principal's moral code reconciled for these "cross-pressures" and guided their work (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2018, p. 399). Increased accountability for student achievement has changed the principal's role and how they do their work.

Changes in the job. Terminology describing the principalship began changing in the early 1990s from educational administration to school leadership and gained a broader perspective, from property of individuals to dynamics of relations (Can Korkut & Llaci, 2016). Principals were now synonymous with leadership, instructional support, and student advocacy—true change agents for their schools (Idrees, 2018). The move toward a more transparent job description marked a change from the previous undefined role that left schools and principals unsure of their work (Idrees, 2018).

A study of 14 principals in a private religious school indicated that building and strengthening relationships with their school family and community had become the biggest priority in their role as principal over a 10-year period (Ledesma, 2013). Increased leadership and management responsibilities related to managing finances, collaborating with a variety of stakeholders, and securing resources in addition to meeting the achievement expectations set by the local, state, and federal stakeholders have added to the complexities associated with the principalship (Anderson, 2017; Ledesma, 2013). Simply stated, principals were now expected to

be more proficient in a larger number of roles than in the past. Such roles included business manager, instructional leader, community engagement expert, data analyst, and marketer for the school (Fuller & Young, 2009). Changes in responsibilities coupled with increased accountability and reform agendas have made the principal job less attractive (Fuller & Young, 2009). Excessive workloads and an increased level of tasks combined with combatting educational reforms has led many principals to debate whether the work is worth the pay (Tekleselassie & Villareal, 2011). Principals were likely unable to meet the requirements of the job without the experience and support needed to do so.

Inexperience and lack of support. Principal experience also affected principal retention. Research by Ni, Sun, and Rorrer (2015) found that charter school principals had higher turnover rates due to inexperience that negatively impacted job performance and job satisfaction. However, any school leader could have limited experience that affects their ability to do the work and their likelihood to succeed. Furthermore, Ni, Sun, and Rorrer (2015) suggested that charter school principals spent more time on administrative responsibilities instead of instruction; but again, any school leader could fall victim to the duties of managing a school rather than leading the instructional work of the school. Whether it is additional staff placed to help support the school or collegial relationships between principals, support came in many forms (Hansen, 2018). Supportive efforts such as help from central office personnel, professional development, and training helped build leadership experience and helped mitigate principal retention.

One way that principals felt unsupported was in their lack of adequate compensation. In many cases, the monetary benefits did not outweigh the additional time and responsibility involved with being a principal if the compensation did not substantially surpass that of a teacher (Fuller & Young, 2009). Tran (2017) found that principals who were “less satisfied with their

pay" were also "more likely to want to quit their job" (p. 634). Hansen (2018) found that rural principals, especially, were frustrated with their salary when compared to their workload. Principals needed the appropriate training and support to face the challenges of their job (Mestry, 2017). Such support empowered leaders and reinforced the idea that educators entered the field to make a difference instead of focusing purely on monetary gain (Tran, 2017). If excessive interference, lack of autonomy, reduced resources, or lack of mentoring existed, then principals often felt dissatisfied with their role as leader (Fuller & Young, 2009). Inexperience and a lack of support made work with specific student demographics even more challenging.

Student demographics. Principal mobility related to student demographics could be better understood through the research of Gates et al. (2006). They found that 33% of principals were leaving their positions in Illinois and North Carolina because of the size of the campus and the number of minority students enrolled in the schools. Sun and Ni (2016) reported school contexts and working conditions as reasons for school leaders wanting to leave the field according to a nationally representative sample of principals from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). School contexts, in this study, were defined as student demographics, such as the number of minority students and the amount of traditionally underserved students in charter schools (Sun & Ni, 2016). In Texas, the rapid growth of schools with a greater percentage of ESL and economically disadvantaged students has added to the complexity of school leadership (Fuller & Young, 2009). Low-performing schools could be more challenging to lead, making it less attractive for principals to stay. Low student achievement perpetuated increased principal turnover, which influenced continued low student achievement simply because principals were not around long enough to break the cycle (Tran, 2017).

Attrition and student achievement. Miller (2013) reported that student test scores were substantially lower at schools with new principals in over 12 years of research from a study in

North Carolina. In fact, low student achievement was found to influence frequent principal turnover where leaders of failing schools were being replaced according to a meta-analysis of mixed methods research from the Wallace Foundation (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). Béteille et al. (2012) discovered that principal turnover had large negative effects on student achievement in high poverty schools. When principals consistently left schools, it disrupted the trajectory and plan of school initiatives or the processes that under consistent leadership would have had a better chance to sustain school efforts. A review of literature by Snodgrass Rangel (2018) found that the determinants most related to principal turnover include school performance. The pressures for high achievement may have contributed to their decision to leave the field (Fuller & Young, 2009).

Disruption of sustainability. The U.S. Department of Labor forecasted challenges in hiring school principals in their 2010–2011 report when they stated that jobs for school principals would continue to increase by about 10 percent through 2020 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). Research has suggested that increased retirements, fewer interested applicants, and increasing student enrollments are challenges in keeping principal positions filled (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). Marks (2013) found a combination of factors contributed to fewer applicants and principal shortages. These factors were the attrition of younger teachers from the profession who could potentially become principals, the reluctance of middle managers to aspire to the next step, and the premature retirements of experienced principals.

Some districts insisted upon a principal rotation system, or a process for systematically moving principals around to different schools, which exacerbated leadership turnover (Dhuey & Smith, 2014). Such turnover made it difficult for principals to influence student success by way of improving teachers' abilities, motivations, or working conditions (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). Principals could improve the likelihood of sustained implementation of improvement

programs by creating a culture around a common vision, providing clear expectations, ensuring accountability and follow-up with efforts, and allocating resources accordingly (Strickland-Cohen, McIntosh, & Horner, 2014). Principal turnover distracted teacher efforts and disrupted school change processes because projects were left incomplete or were changed completely (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Strickland-Cohen et al., 2014). New principals lacked the experience and institutional knowledge that experienced principals would have. When principals were constantly leaving without perfecting their leadership skills, then the combination of turnover and inexperience amplified the challenges of always having new principals (Fuller & Young, 2009). Mascall and Leithwood (2010) described the same challenge as a vicious cycle in low-achieving schools due to principals leaving quickly because of the challenges that accompany such schools and who were replaced by leaders who may not have been qualified or were not committed to the needs of the school. Béteille et al. (2012) suggested that frequent turnover among school principals resulted in lower teacher retention and lower student achievement.

Principal attrition could appear to be justified through legislation and accountability efforts that have affected changes in the job (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). Inexperience and a lack of support for principals added to the reasons why principals left the field (Fuller & Young, 2009). Challenging student demographics and the relationship of demographics to student achievement exacerbated leadership challenges and helped fuel principal attrition (Sun & Ni, 2016). School sustainability was disrupted when principals left their school making it imperative to learn more from the literature about principal retention (Béteille et al., 2012). A wider perspective about what helped leaders remain in the field would support further study of leadership retention.

Research on Principal Retention

Principals influence teachers and employ other supports that have a positive impact on student achievement. Leaders mobilized others in pursuit of a goal (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Regarding the impact of principals, Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin (2013) stated, "Teachers affect only their students, while principals affect all students in a school. The overall impact from increasing principal quality exceeds the benefit from a comparable increase in the quality of a single teacher" (p. 64). Specific leadership practices and the principal's ability to create and maintain a positive school culture have a significant impact on student achievement (Brown, 2016).

Leadership practice. Brown (2016) defined principal influence and principal support as "inter-connected components that mutually support one another" (p. 102). This influence and support came in the form of practices such as establishing a positive school community, protecting instructional time, providing necessary money and resources to achieve school goals, utilizing data to set and monitor school goals in collaborative groups, and facilitating communication and collaboration, which Brown (2016) found helped students make academic gains.

A principal's indirect impact on student achievement was reported to be second only to the impact of teachers on student achievement (Brown, 2016). Branch et al. (2013) stated that a principal's primary work lies in improving the quality of teachers either by developing them so that they employ better instructional practices or through the transition of teachers that improve the school's workforce. Recruiting and retaining quality teachers was an important task for school principals to consider so that increased teacher capacity impacted consistent successful student outcomes (Kokka, 2016). Brown (2016) found additional leadership practices that directly supported teacher retention. The practices included communicating a vision for the

school, supporting and celebrating teachers, and enforcing rules related to safety and discipline. Player, Youngs, Perrone, and Grogan (2017) reported that principal leadership strongly predicted teachers staying at one school even when student or teacher contexts forecasted that turnover was likely.

Hitt and Tucker (2016) conducted a literature review of 56 empirical studies over 14 years that grouped 28 leadership practices within five domains. The authors created five domains: establishing and conveying the vision, facilitating student learning, building professional capacity, creating a supportive organization for learning, and connecting with external partners (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). The authors created these domains to represent the direct effect principals have on teachers and the indirect effect leaders have on students (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Ultimately, these domains reflected how principals have the potential to affect the most important factor—teaching. This spoke to the "primary work of leaders" in potentially enhancing student outcomes through interactions with all stakeholders (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 562).

A study of high-performing school districts in Ontario proved that developing a mission, vision, and shorter-term goals to guide a strategic planning process that included a variety of stakeholders was effective in the success of the district (Leithwood & Azah, 2017). Effective leadership practices such as creating a shared mission, implementing a vision, building trusting relationships, and creating communities of practice, just to name a few, did not happen overnight. It required adequate time to merge into an organizational focus versus an instructional focus, develop shared instructional leadership versus purely instructional leadership, and work as "less of an inspector of teacher practice and more of a facilitator of continual teacher growth" (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 534). The mission, vision, and goals of the school were better sustained when stakeholders developed and committed to the plans to achieve these goals together

(Leithwood & Azah, 2017). Anderson (2017) found that teacher commitment and job satisfaction were significantly influenced by principal practices that built teacher efficacy, which positively affected school performance. When principals built strong relationships with high-efficacy teachers, student engagement and student achievement were also increased (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016). Principals must leverage ways to improve teaching and learning by influencing teacher beliefs about teaching and learning (Brown, 2016). Improved teaching happened when principals fostered teachers' collective capabilities and optimism about their impact on students (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016). True change required moving beyond the initiation and early implementation stages of change, which made the work complex and time consuming (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). Coelli and Green (2012) submitted that principals could have a sizeable impact on student outcomes if given enough time at a school to "make their mark" (p. 107).

Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) echoed the message of other researchers in their work to link indirect leadership practices that affect student learning through the results of almost 3,000 teacher and principal surveys. They found that setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program through a lens of leader self-efficacy and collective efficacy should be prioritized. Significant effects of leader efficacy within these practices were found to positively impact student learning as measured by the number of students meeting or exceeding the standards on the state's proficiency test. Later research by Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi (2010) extended these results with a discussion of the "four paths"—rational, emotions, organizational, and family—that explain how leadership influences student learning. They found that practices like prioritizing teaching and learning, monitoring student performance, and maintaining a positive disciplinary climate had the most significant impact on student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2010).

Ash, Hodge, and Connell (2013) identified five critical practices of effective principals who improve student learning. They found that these principals were focusing on the direction, building a powerful organization, giving life to data, ensuring a student-focused vision and action, and leading learning. Greater success was experienced when these practices were mobilized by the principal into a school-wide approach (Muir, Livy, Herbert, & Callingham, 2018). When purposeful leadership practices are initiated and maintained, a positive school culture can be created.

School culture. Principals were responsible for promoting and maintaining a school culture that supported a positive school climate with an emphasis on learning. The climate itself had a significant impact on principal retention. Liu and Bellibas (2018) found that the most important factor contributing to job satisfaction and organizational commitment was staff mutual respect, which highlights the importance of a positive school climate that supports a respectful and collaborative relationship between all stakeholders. A principal's impact on student achievement was mainly reflected in the school's learning climate and through teacher behaviors (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016; Day et al., 2016; Leithwood & Azah, 2017). Principals have been found to influence mindsets and behaviors that activate and maintain student learning capacity through their work with school staff in creating a learning environment that stimulates curiosity and motivates students (Adams et al., 2017). When principals protected a culture that supported instructional and psychological student needs and nurtured student autonomy and competence, the culture strengthened student learning capacity (Adams et al., 2017). High performing schools were led by principals who created a culture where learning was an essential part of everyday, where teachers collaborated regularly, and where time for reflection was regularly provided (Ash et al., 2013).

Schools were challenged by maintaining the organizational change needed to promote continuous improvement when the continuity of organizational focus and effort in building trusting relationships between stakeholders was interrupted by leadership changes (Tran, 2017). It was reported that it took five to seven years for principals to "build a culture of trust" (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010, p. 370). Adams et al. (2017) described this happening through interactions that built and spread influence within the relational context of the school. Furthermore, it has been suggested that it took five years in the principal position to make and sustain a positive change in schools and create organizational conditions that helped teachers feel competent, autonomous, and relatable in securing their tenure on campus (Hochbein & Cunningham, 2013; Kokka, 2016).

Masters (2010) found that effective leaders created cultures based on high expectations, provided clarity regarding curriculum, established strong learning communities, and promoted continuous improvement. School cultures were further strengthened when a sense of order and safety allowed staff the freedom to take risks in the teaching and learning process (Ash et al., 2013). School leaders' *intentional* conversations with teachers created a school culture built on mutual consent by all stakeholders (instead of top-down demands on staff members) and has been found to positively impact student learning capacity (Adams et al., 2017). Intentional conversations include the act of listening or paying attention to talents and skills of all stakeholders (Ash et al., 2013). Through these conversations principals set the direction, organized teaching and the curriculum, facilitated professional learning, established a supportive environment, and developed resources with school stakeholders that supported the connection between teacher commitment and student achievement (Anderson, 2017; Adams et al., 2017). Increasing teacher learning capacity and continuous improvement translated into increased student achievement—the primary goal for all schools.

Retention and student achievement. The work of school leaders everywhere includes improving student achievement. This emphasis was especially important considering the increasing demands of school accountability nationwide. Branch et al. (2013) found that "highly effective principals raised the achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months of learning in a single school year" in Texas (p. 63). The researchers found that the "impact of having a principal one standard deviation more effective than the average principal was as much as seven additional months of learning in a single year" (Branch et al., 2013, p. 65). A body of research throughout the United States has connected the length of leadership service to the success of students regardless of leadership effectiveness. In fact, "schools led by fewer principals during a 10-year period outperformed schools that had experienced greater principal turnover" (Huff et al., 2011, p, 76). For example, students in Kentucky showed growth in achievement test scores when superintendents served in the same district for more than five years (Simpson, 2013). A connection between principal longevity and student achievement could also be seen. Two different studies in Georgia found that schools led by fewer principals outperformed schools that had experienced greater turnover, especially in Grades 3 and 5 where student achievement scores were higher in schools with greater principal stability (Brockmeier, Starr, Green, Pate, & Leach, 2013; Huff, et al., 2011). From their study of principals in Texas, Fuller & Young (2009) indicated that elementary schools had the highest principal retention rates, especially in suburban districts. They also determined that retention rates were influenced by student achievement gains in the principal's first year of employment.

Hochbein and Cunningham (2013) revealed research from a Midwestern metropolitan school district where principals serving for at least four years demonstrated greater rates of student success compared to their less experienced peers. A study in New Jersey reported a significant association existed between principal length of service and student performance on

the state mandated math test. As the principal's years of service increased, students' math proficiency also increased (Babo & Postma, 2017). They reinforced the idea that the complexities of school leadership required principals to remain at a school long enough to maintain continuous and persistent effort that influenced overall school success.

From building school cultures to improving student achievement, school principals employed a variety of leadership strategies to get the job done. Successful principals were intuitive, informed, and strategic (Day et al., 2016). They built cultures that promoted staff and student engagement while also raising students' achievement levels in ways that made applying leadership practices (not the practices themselves) the differential for success (Day et al., 2016). Day et al. argued that

> schools' abilities to improve and sustain effectiveness over the long term are not primarily the result of the principals' leadership style but of their understanding and diagnosis of the school's needs and their application of clearly articulated, organizationally shared educational values through multiple combinations of accumulations of time and context-sensitive strategies that are "layered" and progressively embedded in the school's work, culture, and achievements. (p. 222)

Summary

Despite understanding why principals left the field and the research that explained the effects of principal attrition, little research has examined why principals choose to remain in the field. Legislation and accountability coupled with inexperience and lack of support reflect reasons why principals have been leaving the field. Student demographics could impact student achievement, which also influenced principals to leave their positions. The disruption in sustainability efforts because of continuously changing principals could negatively impact schools. It may be clear how schools benefited from principal retention through continuous leadership practices that built a strong culture and impacted student achievement, but little has been studied about the aspects principals value as important for leadership retention. The next

section explains the methodological approach used to find out more about the aspects that influence principal retention. Chapter 3 includes the research design, population, materials, data collection, and analysis procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Principal retention has been an ongoing challenge for school districts around the country (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). Principals have been leaving the field for a variety of reasons, including accountability pressures (Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013), complexity of the job (Mehta, 2015), lack of support (Hansen, 2018), and compensation (Tran, 2017). Principals had a variety of pressing responsibilities including personnel issues, student discipline, parent concerns, community perceptions, and ensuring academic success for all students (Huff et al., 2011). The role of principal continued to change due to the increasing demands of school accountability nationwide and the focus on principals making a more direct impact on student achievement (Brown, 2016).

Qualitative research evaluates life as it is lived (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The purpose of this qualitative research case study with multiple participants was to investigate principal retention from the perspective of elementary school principals. I sought to find out how elementary school principals in Central Texas described the experiences that influenced their longevity in the field. More specifically, I wished to address the following research questions:

Q1. What were the primary factors that contributed to the decision of principals to remain in the principalship?

Q2. What were the primary factors that contributed to the decision of incumbent principals to leave the principalship?

This chapter describes the research design, research method, and provides a discussion about data collection and analysis. Lastly, the chapter examines ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations concerning the proposed qualitative study about principal retention.

Research Design and Method

The framework and plan for researching principal retention included epistemological, theoretical, and methodological premises as proposed by Saldaña & Omasta (2018). They suggested that the "method's primary purpose is to provide a rich medium for examining the human condition" (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p.146). This study was defined as a case study about principals' perceptions of retention and attrition. The boundaries of the case are elementary school principals in Central Texas who have served in the field for five or more years or who left the field within the last two years. Case study, as a method, was appropriate for researching principal retention because it is an empirical method that investigates a contemporary circumstance within a real-world context (Yin, 2018). Stake (2006) asserted that cases in a study can be an arena for bringing many "functions and relationships" together for study because experiencing the activity of the case in the context of the situation in which it occurs shapes the activity, the experience, and the interpretation of the activity (p. 2). This case study consisted of data analyzed from interviews with principals, a focus group experience, and student demographic data from each school.

I conducted interviews using a semistructured interview protocol (Appendix A). Semistructured interviews provide a degree of structure but also allow the interviewer leeway to adjust along the way based on the results of their "in-interview" analysis (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 92). Brinkmann (2013) asserted the value of qualitative interviewing through the natural way humans use conversation to gain knowledge about others. In this study, I recorded interviews and analyzed data using a variety of coding methods. Codes, or one-word representations of larger data, developed into analytic memos and helped identify categories, themes, and concepts regarding aspects and experiences of leadership that influenced principal retention (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). My qualitative case study, which includes the perceptions

of a variety of principals employed in diverse school districts in Central Texas, helped determine how experiences affect principal retention and identified the factors that motivate leaders to stay across many settings so that school improvement is maximized on a larger scale. Data from this case study predicted similar results or forecasted contrasting results but for understandable reasons (Yin, 2018).

I also conducted a focus group with the same principals to gain conversational interactions and "build on one another's ideas" regarding principal retention (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 93). Together in the focus group session, participants viewed a 10-minute news broadcast titled *Training and Retaining Great Principals in Urban Schools*, which aired on PBS in 2013 (PBS, 2013). After viewing the video, participants responded to follow-up questions regarding their thoughts about the content of the video (Appendix B). I recorded the focus group's discussion and analyzed it for patterns. I compared patterns from the interviews to either strengthen the patterns from the interview or provide additional perspectives about principal retention that did not originally surface during the interviews.

Lastly, I collected school demographic data about ethnicity and socioeconomic status and compared it to leadership experiences so that connections, if any, could be made between specific school composition and its influence on leadership experiences. I charted comparisons to reflect any patterns or trends. Data collected from multiple case studies, the focus group, and school demographic data helped achieve triangulation for the study. Stake (2006) stated that triangulation is considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning while also checking the repeatability of an experience. Yin (2018) confirmed this idea by commenting that triangulation helps develop "convergent evidence" from multiple sources to gain increased measures of the same phenomenon (p.128). A combination of data and the credibility of findings

across the data from at least three different sources helped ensure “more dimension” to the overall data surrounding principal experiences (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 99; Stake, 2006).

Population

Elementary principals from two urban districts and one suburban district located in Region XII of Central Texas who had served at least five years at the same school were the population of the study. I selected five years as the desired amount of longevity because it was supported by current research related to the expected time it took for principals to positively impact student achievement. Hull (2012) reported that principals usually stay at one school for three to four years but need five to apply processes and practices that will sustain school improvement. Principals who served for at least five years maximized their leverage in creating distributed leadership and establishing positive relationships (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Stone-Johnson, 2014).

Elementary leaders who left the elementary principalship within the last two years comprised a subpopulation for the study. Their insights helped provide an alternate perspective about leadership retention. Explanations for leaving the field were compared to the experiences of principals who remained in the field to help summarize the variety of principal experiences that impact leadership retention.

Sample

I selected a sample of 10 principals to ensure both genders were represented. A stratified sampling supports a more representative sample of a larger population of elementary school principals. I selected participants based on the number of years they had served as a building leader (at least five years) or the number of years that they had been away from the principalship (no more than two years). Individual school websites helped me contact potential participants via email and screen them based on their years of experience. Current principals were able to assist

me in locating potential participants that recently left the elementary principalship. They knew colleagues that had recently been promoted or knew which schools had recently experienced a change in leadership. In most cases, brand new principals were also able to tell me where their predecessor had gone. Once identified, I randomly selected participants and recruited them via an email invitation to participate in the study. I invited the same sample of principals to participate in the focus group. The sample of 10 principals helped reach saturation without being repetitive. As data was collected, theoretical perspectives became evident and were instrumental in shaping the trajectory of the research (Yin, 2004).

Instruments

The study followed IRB ethical guidelines and ACU's guideline for informed consent (Appendix D). After gaining an informed consent, I scheduled interviews and used a semistructured interview protocol to collect data from principals. I created the questions for the interview protocol and had them vetted by an expert panel of published educators and top-level school district leaders including an assistant superintendent of leadership and a director for professional human resources. Research from the literature review suggested aspects of leadership that influence retention. Questions were designed to identify and describe what aspects of leadership were important to principals with regard to remaining in the field. The interview protocol avoided asking leading questions or questions that had an obviously desirable response in order to minimize social desirability bias or participant compliance (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). I audio recorded interviews and transcribed them using a reliable computer application: GoTo Meeting. An independent transcriber helped to limit bias. I took field notes during the interviews to monitor principals' behavior during the process.

Second, I intended to host a focus group at a venue that was centrally located to all participants involved. A computer projector system was going to play the video for the

participants, and then I planned to ask a set of follow-up questions to glean the participants' thoughts and reflections on the video; however, finding a central location for all participants was a challenge. To make it more convenient, a virtual focus group was held using a feature on GoTo Meeting. Participants were all able to connect online, view the broadcast together, and then answer the follow-up questions that I created. The follow-up questions were vetted by an expert panel of published educators and top-level school district leaders including an assistant superintendent of leadership and a director for professional human resources. The focus group questions allowed participants to reflect on their own leadership experiences in relation to the principals' experiences in the video. The connections helped compare or contrast experiences within the context of principal retention, strengthening the potential for patterns between interview responses and focus group responses. I audio recorded the focus group experience so that a general transcription was possible. I will destroy all audio recordings, video recordings, and transcribed data five years after the completion of the study to ensure additional confidentiality.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

I used individual school websites to contact potential participants via email and screened them based on their years of experience. Once potential participants were identified, I invited principals via email to participate. I emailed an informed consent to interested principals to complete, scan, and return to me. Upon receiving a completed consent, I worked with the principal to schedule an interview at a mutually agreeable time.

A prepared interview protocol guided the interview session (Appendix A). I audio recorded the interview and also took field notes during the interview. After the interview was completed, I used a reliable computer application to transcribe the interviews. I then discussed details about a scheduled focus group meeting at this time. I designed focus group questions to

provide a structured conversation around the video (Appendix B). I audio recorded the group conversation so that I could identify participants as they engage in conversation. I returned interview transcriptions to the participant for member checking and to ensure that the participant agreed with the interview as it was written. This review helped with the revising and improved interpretation of the reporting (Stake, 2006).

I used the interview transcripts to code data into more manageable units that helped expedite analysis using a qualitative research analysis system, in vivo. In vivo coding enabled me to organically extract the participants' own language as an initial system for qualitative data analysis (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Codes are prompts or triggers for continued reflection for category development (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). After continued reflection of the original codes, additional passes using process coding helped transition the uniqueness of in vivo codes to identify repeated codes that highlight routines and patterns of action (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Ideally, narrative memos reflected participants' experiences and allowed for "cross-case comparisons" and patterns to emerge (Drago-Severson, 2012, p. 20). Codes were then grouped into categories based on a relevant pattern of comparable things (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Subsequently, I reviewed the codes and transferred them into categories so that analytic filtering for clustering categories and creating sub-categories were present. The categories became the focus for the next step of analysis where I identified themes that emerged from the pattern of ideas in the categories. I reorganized themes into theoretical constructs based on commonality. Themes, or final interpretations, are phrases that serve as abstract summations of a set of related themes and will help arrive at the study's final results (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

Lastly, I gained student demographic information for each school represented from the Texas Academic Performance Report (Texas Education Agency, 2019). I analyzed student demographics in relation to the participant's views regarding the aspects that influence principal

retention. Specifically, I charted student ethnicity and socioeconomic percentages by school and compared them to principal responses to question 3e of the interview: How do student diversity, as defined by ethnicity and socioeconomic status, and the needs of students influence you to remain in the position? A connection between percentages of student ethnicity and socioeconomic status with principal responses about how diversity impacts their decision to remain in or move away from the principalship further described if and how student diversity affects principal retention. Overall, participants (and schools) were identified with a given number to differentiate them from another participant. Districts were assigned a letter. I did not describe the participants in enough detail to make their identities obvious or evident.

Yin (2018) suggested following an analytic strategy as a cycle that guides the researcher through analysis. The collection of principals served as a case study that, together, reflected shared concepts related to principal retention. The focus group video, questions, and discussions connected themes from individual interviews to corresponding student demographic data and supported triangulation of the data. Together, the analysis from all data points showed attention to all of the evidence, investigated rival interpretations, addressed significant aspects, and demonstrated familiarity with current thinking about principal retention (Yin, 2018).

Methods for establishing trustworthiness. When researching within a naturalistic inquiry, qualitative studies require effort with establishing trustworthiness through credibility. The audience must believe that the researcher conducted the study and the analytic processes and outcomes to gain results that make sense and substantiate the process (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Trustworthiness and credibility were determined through a "carefully conceived and implemented" research design (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p, 272). I achieved transparency with data collection through the number of interviews that I conducted so that saturation occurred. I also cited the data collection tool or case study protocol to provide a fair and objective view of

results and basis for analysis (Yin, 2004). I utilized uniform questions as a basis for the interviews and the focus group exercise. The questions prevented me from influencing the study and minimized researcher bias. Strict confidentiality of the study participants contributed to a trustworthy study.

Researcher's role. I knew some but not all of the participants in the study; however, my experience as an elementary school principal assisted in guiding the semistructured interview. Although specific questions constituted the interview protocol, possible probes assisted in phrasing the inquiry accordingly. I remained objective in the data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results recognizing that the goal of qualitative case studies is to have participants share as much as possible with minimal direction from me, the interviewer (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

I applied for study approval from ACU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were protected by giving districts, schools, and principals pseudonyms. The geographic area, Central Texas, is the only identifier for the area from which participants were selected. Participants were also reassured that their recordings and data would be destroyed after five years. Years of experience were the only qualifier for the study, meaning no other factors discriminated against a principal from participating. Through the use of a detailed informed consent form, participants had succinct and important information about the study. Furthermore, the consent forms indicated the minimal risk involved with the study and the participants' rights to leave the study at any time with no repercussions. No data collection occurred until ACU's IRB fully approved the study.

Assumptions

This study was based on several assumptions. First, that principals invited to participate in the study were selected appropriately. By contacting principals directly about their years of service and only utilizing longevity in the position as a determinant for inviting participants, the selection process ensured that participants had similar experiences for the study. Second, that participants would speak openly and honestly during the interview. To help justify this assumption, I protected the anonymity and confidentiality of each participant. I addressed this assumption by providing participants with a general transcription of the conversation and assuring them that all audio and video recordings would be destroyed after five years of the study. Another assumption was that participants would participate candidly and honestly during the focus group exercise. I addressed this assumption by assuring participants that audio and video recordings would be destroyed after five years of the study. Lastly, I assumed that principals genuinely wanted to participate in the study and had no other motives for being involved. I justified this assumption by reiterating to participants that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Limitations

Because this study connected with 10 principals who have either stayed in the field or left the field and did not have an equal number of both, this study had limitations in being able to apply analytic generalizations. Yin (2018) stated that case study research is only generalizable to theoretical propositions, not to populations. The theories that are proposed and based on findings lay a foundation for making “analytic generalizations” from the case study (Yin, 2018, p. 24). Also, with 10 principals representing three school districts in Central Texas, it is possible that the results were limited to the geographic area where the research was conducted. Finally, the focus group experience, by nature, offers little confidentiality or anonymity considering participants

heard or saw and maybe recognized one another during the experience. This could have affected the participants from being open and honest during the experience.

Delimitations

Principal perspectives about aspects that influence leadership retention were gathered from interviews and a focus group experience. Leadership retention is a vast topic that cannot be completely studied through 10 interviews and one focus group exercise. The study did not include what participants did not report.

Summary

Case study research seeks to explain a contemporary circumstance in which a researcher has little or no control (Yin, 2018). My interviews with 10 elementary school principals in Central Texas, hosting a focus group experience, and comparing school demographic data to participant responses identified the aspects principals value as important for leadership retention and how these aspects influence their leadership retention. Such research connected the theoretical frameworks explaining how leadership should operate with the contextual experiences that occur during the work (Zambo, 2014).

Chapter 3 identified and discussed the research design and method that were used for this qualitative study about principal retention while also providing a discussion about data collection and analysis. Lastly, the chapter examined ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations concerning the research study. Chapter 4 provides the results of the study. A complete analysis of the interview and focus group data along with a discussion of the themes that resulted from the data are included. Chapter 4 reports the results of the qualitative data relative to the research questions.

Chapter 4: Results

As the researcher of the applied dissertation, I intended to investigate principal retention from the perspective of elementary school principals. The main goal was to determine how elementary school principals in Central Texas described experiences that influenced their longevity in the field. The challenges related to retaining school principals made the investigation an important one. Once the data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for meaning, specific themes emerged related to these two research questions:

Q1. What were the primary factors that contributed to the decision of principals to remain in the principalship?

Q2. What were the primary factors that contributed to the decision of incumbent principals to leave the principalship?

In this chapter I present the process used to investigate the two research questions and the results of the investigation.

Process for Semistructured Interviews

I wanted to include in my study both incumbent principals as well as principals who had recently left the principalship. After receiving IRB approval, I began contacting potential participants from school districts in Central Texas. Individual school websites provided contact information about campus principals and in some cases, the amount of time the principal had been serving at the school. Six incumbent principals who have served for five or more years agreed to participate through an email request. I used a variety of approaches to secure participants who had left the principalship. I contacted district leaders from around Central Texas for their help in identifying principals who had recently left the principalship. I also contacted principals who were new to the position to find out where their predecessor might have moved. Lastly, I contacted the University of Houston's Center for Research, Evaluation, and the

Advancement of Teacher Education to seek their assistance. Representatives from the university indicated that they were unable to provide specific names of principals as it would have violated the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The most effective approach in recruitment of participants who recently left the elementary principalship was asking current principals and district leaders if they knew of any colleagues who had recently left the position. This informal network helped me locate two principals who had moved into other school related positions and two more principals who had left the elementary principalship to become middle school principals. Each of the four moves were considered promotions. There were 10 participants selected for both the interviews and the focus group. Demographics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Education Level	Experience
101	Male	Hispanic	Masters	5 years
102	Male	Caucasian	Doctorate	7 years
103	Female	Caucasian	Masters	7 years
104	Female	Caucasian	Masters	1 year
105	Female	African American	Masters	7 years
106	Female	Caucasian	Masters	5 years
107	Female	Caucasian	Doctorate	10 years
108	Female	Caucasian	Masters	6 years
109	Female	Caucasian	Doctoral Candidate	7 years
110	Female	Caucasian	Masters	17 years

Once participants returned their consent forms, I scheduled a virtual interview time using GoTo Meeting. All interviews were audio recorded. Three participants chose the feature that allowed for video recording. Each participant had a copy of the interview questions prior to the

interview. The interviews averaged 30 minutes in length, and I used a semistructured interview protocol.

Process for Focus Group Interviews

After I conducted the one-on-one interviews, I scheduled two focus group meetings with the same 10 participants. One meeting was with the group of six current principals and the other meeting was with the four principals who left the elementary role within the last two years. Three of the six current principals participated in their focus group and all of the four former elementary principals participated in their focus group. Each focus group met virtually and together they viewed a 10-minute news broadcast titled *Training and Retaining Great Principals in Urban Schools*, which aired on the Public Broadcasting Service in 2013. I shared the video through the screen sharing feature in GoTo Meeting. Principals answered the focus group questions in a group discussion. Participants had a copy of the focus group questions prior to the meeting. The focus group meetings averaged 30 minutes in length and the group discussions were audio recorded.

Process for Reviewing Student Demographic Data

Lastly, I reviewed student demographic data located in the state's annual accountability report—the Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR)—from the participants' campuses. The TAPR report is published annually by the state and contains comprehensive information related to a district or campus. Information includes student demographic breakdown by student and staff, assessment results by content and grade level within student demographic categories, fiscal expenditures per student, salaries for staff, staff years of experience, staff retention rates, student attendance percentages, and staff and student mobility rates. For current principals, I reviewed the most recent report, which was the 2017–2018 report. For principals who left the elementary principalship, I reviewed the report from the last year they served as principal,

depending on when they left the school. After collecting the data from the semistructured interviews, focus group interviews, and TAPR reports, I began the analysis process.

Emerging Themes

A combination of in vivo and process coding techniques helped identify themes that reflected as the most common thinking of participants. Several themes surfaced as the most influential factors that contributed to the decisions of current principals to remain in the principalship or of incumbent principals to leave the elementary principalship. These themes were leadership beliefs, giving and getting support, and complex job responsibilities.

Theme 1: Leadership beliefs. A common thread among all of the participant responses was their subscription to the moral imperative of being a principal. Whether they were a current principal or one that had recently left the elementary principalship, principals spoke about their inherent need to make a difference. This finding helped identify how their beliefs about leadership influenced their retention in the field. Regardless of their current role, participant beliefs about leadership became apparent in their answers to why they wanted to become a principal or what they found desirable about the job. Thoughts about leadership beliefs were also apparent in responses about how accountability and student diversity influence leadership retention. Words and phrases such as *make an impact, invest, dig deep, obligation to all kids, up to me, ensure learning, called to serve, expand my control, make a difference,* and *lead by example* were heard repeatedly over the course of every interview and reinforced how leadership beliefs fueled participants' desires to be school leaders. Participant 105 illustrated this in her description of when she knew she wanted to become a school principal. She said, "Wanting to dig that much deeper into instruction and how to improve teaching and learning for kids . . . led me to going into administration so I could do that." This was immediately reinforced with her answer to what was desirable about the job. She replied that

> I think the thing that kind of led me to become a principal is the same thing. That kind of keeps me serving as a principal and that is really just a desire to prepare kids to be confident, responsible adults who can chart their own future of what they want to be when they grow up and kids having the power to be able to do that as adults starts with us empowering them as kids, especially in the elementary school years so that they are well-equipped to be whatever they choose to be, whatever that might be. So just a notion that I can take the lead and create an atmosphere that makes it possible for kids to be able have that kind of power is pretty incredible.

All of the participants talked about the sense of duty they felt in impacting positive change at their schools. Seven participants cited students and student success as the most important aspect that influenced retention in the field. Even in light of other influences, such as accountability and building relationships with teachers, the overarching belief around making a difference was the strongest. Related to assessment and accountability, participant 101 reinforced this when he said, "I want them [students] to taste that student achievement only because I know how important it is." He also said, "In life there is going to be a challenge and they [students] are going to have to meet it." Both comments show his beliefs about leadership superseding his beliefs about assessment and accountability. The same principal also prioritized his leadership beliefs and his sense of urgency for student achievement over building relationships. This was reflected when he said that

> you want to build relationships with adults and staff members because they will make the biggest change; however, there's some time limits to that because in the background, when you are trying to do that, there's students that are either progressing or not progressing and you can't really run the risk of allowing them to go a whole year with bad instruction . . . although relationships are still important, it's very important, there's a bigger thing going on there for students—higher stakes for them.

School situations and contexts that allowed principals to maintain their beliefs about leadership supported principal retention in the field. Leadership beliefs were so important that if or when principals felt their beliefs contradicted those of the district, that was a reason to leave the principalship. Participant 104 stated, "My philosophy and the district's philosophy didn't quite align" and "I feel like once you realize that you're not the right fit, you're not who or what

that particular school or district needs, that it's the mature decision to step aside and let someone else who might be a better fit take over and do what's right for those students." When asked if there was anything that could have influenced her decision to stay, she promptly stated, "No."

Furthermore, participant responses about compensation reinforced the idea that their moral obligation to making a difference was more important than a job defined by getting a paycheck. Four of the current principals did not cite compensation as an influence for remaining in the field. None of the four principals who recently left the elementary principalship cited compensation as an influence for leaving. Related to compensation and its lack of influence on retention, participants used words and phrases such as *it doesn't motivate me, it's not a huge thing, it has nothing to do with it [leaving], don't give it much thought, not a reason at all, never really thought about it,* and *not a deal-breaker*. Several principals (109, 103, 110) responded that they could be making more money by doing something else, so compensation was not a factor in being a school principal. Participant 107 saw compensation as a way for the district to support her; therefore, she felt consistent pay raises communicated positive support from the district and it was the idea of support, not compensation, that influenced her to remain in the principalship. She reported, "I think it's a huge influence [for remaining in the position]. I started in 1979, so I'm almost 40 years into it and every year I have received a raise but one. I think it's a huge factor that you have that support from the school board who represent the public."

Participant 102 also made a connection between compensation and district support when he stated that

> I think more important than the compensation is what does the district and what does the leader do to value the people in it. You can pay me whatever you want. But if you treat me like a professional and if you treat me like a valued member of your organization, that means so much more to me, in some cases, than what's in the paycheck.

This reflected why compensation did not influence his retention. He went on to state, "I don't

feel like we're getting paid what we should be getting but it's not a deal-breaker because it doesn't feel like anybody's getting paid what they deserve."

Participant 106 felt she was not compensated for her hard work, but she remained in the principalship regardless. Participant 104 had left the principalship, but not because of compensation. In fact, she knowingly took a pay cut to take the principal position and again when leaving the principalship. She stated, "The compensation was not a factor in it [leaving] whatsoever."

Compensation came up in the focus group interviews as well. When participants were asked to choose between a culture of allowing a principal to do their job or monetary incentives as the most impactful influence on principal retention, every participant in the focus groups (whether current or recently left the elementary principalship) selected a culture of allowing a principal to do their job. Participant 109 recently left the elementary principalship to lead at a specialty middle school campus that was also categorized as *improvement required*, a state accountability designation based on campus student achievement and that requires a variety of different interventions that include improvement planning and continuous monitoring from the state (Texas Education Agency, 2019). She stated the following regarding this issue: "The only reason we [the school] have been able to make as much progress this year is because they [central office] trusted me to do this job."

Leadership beliefs showed to be the most significant influence regarding principal retention. The strong desire to make a difference for students overshadowed many other factors related to a principal's work such as accountability, or motivations for doing the work such as compensation. The freedom to use those beliefs to do what is needed for the job outweighed the desire to be paid more. Leadership beliefs were so important that principals considered leaving the role when their leadership beliefs were not aligned to those of the district, impacting principal

retention.

Theme 2: Giving and getting support. Support—giving it and getting it—was heavily emphasized throughout the one-on-one interviews and focus group conversations. Part of the participants' leadership beliefs included helping students by supporting teachers and other adults that work with students. Giving others support was important to principals in doing their work. It was commonly discussed when asked what was desirable about the job, if or how their beliefs about leadership had changed, and in the aspects that were most important about remaining in or leaving the elementary principalship. Words and phrases such as *relationships, help others, assisting families, teachers need support, working with people, bank people's trust, servant leader, developing teachers, collaborating,* and *building others* were used to describe the inherent need to support others through the principalship. Participant 109 recently left the elementary principalship to take a position leading a specialty campus that struggled, according to state accountability reports. Even though she left one venue for another, she connected her motivations to support others with her new work as a campus leader when she stated that

> one of the things that keeps me in the position and will continue to keep me in a position for a couple of more years is just developing teachers. It's something I am pretty passionate about and it's been a new paradigm for me because I have all new teachers, like 25 of them, and between all of them they've got 20 years of experience. They're so young and just seeing what they need keeps me motivated to continue to be here to lead them to be the best they can be.

Three more principals (105, 107, and 110) cited collaboration, supporting and building the team, and the people they work with as the most important aspects in remaining a school leader. Even though they recently left the elementary principalship, two participants (104 and 108) cited their beliefs about servant leadership and being a servant leader as key to their work as leaders and supporting others. When participant 102 was asked about the most important aspects in remaining a school leader, he said, "Just getting to work with the people I get to work with . . .

it makes a difference when we're helping teachers to do their job better."

Getting support was also very important to school principals and another factor related to retention. When asked how support influenced their retention, all participants remarked about it. The majority of the participants stated it was "huge" or "a big deal." Participants described support using words and phrases such as *relationship with the district, staffing, professional development, training, networking,* and *opportunities for growth*. Even though she recently left the elementary role to become a middle school principal, participant 103 remained in the same district. She cited getting support as the most important aspect that influenced her to remain a school principal when she said, "Support from admin and knowing that I can pick up the phone and call when I am in a sticky situation . . . is very important for me to know that it's okay to ask for their help."

A lack of support was reported as a reason why principals would consider leaving the elementary principalship, or worse, why they did leave the elementary principalship. Participant 102 described a previous experience before relocating to Central Texas where he did not feel supported and was considering leaving the principal position for work outside of leadership. He said, "I was going to leave [the principal position] if I had stayed in [other state]. I had been offered an equivalent to a region job and it [leaving] had a lot to do with not feeling supported." Participant 104 did leave the principal position and made the following remarks about getting support:

> With me coming from a larger district where I had served and seeing how that district supported their teachers and their staff and then going to a district where it seemed like they were in the infancy stages of that, it was pretty frustrating. Because you can't unknow what you know, it was frustrating the lack of support . . . the resources weren't there.

Support from the district was also a central theme in the focus group discussions. Participants reflected upon a television broadcast about a leadership preparation program where

principal interns were mentored by veteran principals in the field. Every participant in the focus groups agreed that support through mentoring was *critical, mandatory,* or *key* in the success of principals. Participant 102 reinforced his answers about support from the one-on-one interviews when he told the group the following:

> I think some type of support system is mandatory or should be mandatory. I have been places where I feel like I've been out there by myself and I've been places where I feel like there's been good support systems and a structure in place and I feel I was most successful when I had those people to call and just the feeling of being supported.

Participant 110 stated, "I think they [intern preparation programs] are key to retention because the support from other principals is key to success because it nurtures each spirit and you're not in there alone." Participant 104, having recently left the principalship, remarked, "When there's a lack of an effective mentor, I think it really plays a part in your role."

Giving and getting support was a major theme noted by the participants regarding their retention. Connected to leadership beliefs, principals needed to be able to give support to others in their work as leaders; this strengthened their retention in the field. Principals also needed to receive support and feel supported from central office. When this was not apparent, principals were more likely to leave the principalship.

Theme 3: Complex job responsibilities. Principals consistently referred to the challenges connected to their job responsibilities when responding to questions about their anticipations about the job, if there were any surprises after taking the job, and if their beliefs about leadership had changed. Some of the words and phrases used by principals included *keeping up, huge responsibility, every single day, all-consuming, quick on your feet, so many responsibilities, a lot of different tasks,* and *full-time*. A thread connecting job responsibilities with leadership beliefs remained apparent throughout the responses. All of the current principals agreed that while they were responsible for a lot of different tasks, it was worth it. In fact, when

asked how the responsibilities affected retention, participant 107 reported, “I thrive on it [responsibilities].” Participant 102 mentioned that the “constant change keeps you coming back.” Participant 105 summed it up best when she said that

> it’s amazing work and there are so many responsibilities from academics to budget, school improvement, building teacher capacity, having an orderly environment—there’s so many things that entails, all those pieces. They all work together towards one goal . . . but, again, as a principal, I just really try to keep an eye on [it] all; those things are important so that we can ensure and support the fact that learning is happening.

Of the four principals who recently left, three of them described how the job responsibilities affected their decision to leave the position. Participant 109 left her smaller elementary school for a larger middle school campus because a larger team made the job and responsibilities “doable.” She noted that she was “worn out” without the additional support. Participant 104 reported that it was “wearing to be the ultimate problem-solver.” Participant 108 noted that leading a campus identified as improvement required added more tasks and “people that you are accountable for.” While she stated that it was not more than she could handle, she also noted that her motivation for leaving the principalship was to have better work hours and less stress.

The conceptual framework related to shared or distributed leadership became apparent during the conversation with principals about job responsibilities. Participant 102 spoke about his continued efforts at doing more to “utilize teacher leaders.” He expanded on this by saying,

> We need to use our teacher leaders because they’re the smart people in the schools and they’re the ones working in the trenches with the kids . . . you know, so I am not doing all the work . . . where you have to give up some of that control. I don’t need to be in charge of everything. Teachers can make staff development, teachers can help determine what some of our procedures are going to be because they are the ones actually carrying them out.

The focus group conversations connected shared or distributed leadership to job responsibilities as well. When asked if sharing leadership affected their retention, all of the

principals who participated in the focus group experience agreed that it did. Participant 102 reinforced what he said in his one-on-one interview when he stated, “Sharing the leadership is embracing other leaders in the building and not realizing that we’re the only one that has that capacity.” Participant 110 stated, “When you share the leadership you have a team that promotes the vision and culture so that you can improve.” Participant 104 further confirmed the connections between shared leadership and principal retention when she said,

> That really changes a culture if you allow your stakeholders to have a voice in what happens, and I think that empowers the principal on that campus even more to move forward and do the things he or she needs to do to make the campus successful.

These responses reflected how sharing leadership impacts the principals’ job responsibilities and supports the combined efforts toward the collective goal—making a difference by improving teaching and learning. In other words, participants attested that their job responsibilities are a vehicle to employ shared or distributed leadership to help do the work. This dynamic helps retain principals in the field.

Comments about job responsibilities included managing the expectations related to state assessments and accountability. Participants used words and phrases such as *necessary evil, fuzzy math, student growth, good purpose, hard, keeps us on track,* and *ulterior motives* to describe their thoughts about state testing and accountability. Most of the current principals agreed that being held accountable to student growth was expected and understandable. Participant 105 stated,

> I want to see results and we should all want to see; that’s how we can begin to know if what we’re doing in our school is working or not. So, although there’s things about our accountability system that maybe I don’t necessarily agree with, I think the core of why the system is there is for a good purpose.

Participant 106 echoed this sentiment when she remarked, “The system is hard on schools and teachers . . . it’s important because it keeps us on track.” Participant 101 said he enjoyed the

accountability. Participant 107 stated that accountability was the weakest influence causing her to leave the position. She stated, “We should have some accountability. Everybody’s goal is for students to achieve, that’s what we are all in it for.” This comment was quickly concluded by her saying, “That [accountability] is something I will not miss when I retire.”

Two of the four participants that recently left the elementary role and were both serving at campuses identified as improvement required, had different views about accountability. Participant 108 spoke about the desire to “find that balance of what you truly believe in as an educator in developing and growing that whole child and not just that test.” Participant 104 extended this idea when she stated, “It’s just one piece and so I would have preferred to have had the entire picture looked at rather than just one snapshot.” She affirmed how accountability influenced her retention when she said, “The accountability piece played a huge role in my decision to leave the principalship.”

Complex job responsibilities that included managing state assessment and accountability expectations was a major theme related to principal retention. Conceptual frameworks tied to shared or distributed leadership were cited as opportunities for principals to share job responsibilities and strengthen the work of the school. Principals were most satisfied with fulfilling their responsibilities and therefore more inclined to remain in the position when they could share the work with others.

Themes as Evidenced by Methods

I collected responses from the participants through two methods: semistructured individual interviews followed by focus group interviews at a later time. This section will present the responses in that order.

In the first semistructured interview question I asked participants to state their name, current position, a description of what their position entails and how long they have served in

this position. I then asked the second interview question: “Please describe the point in which you decided you wanted to become a principal.” Additional subquestions included the following: (a) What is desirable about this job; (b) Did the job turn out to be what you anticipated; (c) Have there been any surprises while serving as principal; and (d) Have your beliefs about leadership changed since your first year in the role? These questions allowed participants to reflect on their motivations for becoming a leader and the early stages of their work. They allowed for principals to compare their beliefs from when they started to how they feel now.

Leadership beliefs and semistructured interviews. All of the participants communicated how they saw the step into the principalship as an extension of being a classroom teacher or assistant principal. Two of the principals spoke of choosing education as a second career. This was a decision made after they found their first career to be unfulfilling or because of downsizing. Participant 101 said that he found it desirable to affect more students and influence more things than what was possible as a teacher. He said, “I wanted a little bit more. I wanted to expand my control of some of the things.” Participant 107 stated that she found the opportunity to influence change as most desirable.

Giving and getting support and semistructured interviews. Regarding support, participants 109 and 110 spoke about the desire to support teachers and kids as what they found the most appealing about becoming a principal. Participant 109 stated, “[Being principal] is the best of both worlds because I get to work with the kids . . . and I get to work with teachers and help develop their skills in order to improve the learning process.” Participant 110 stated, “The desirable part is supporting the teachers and promoting public education.”

All participants commented how important it was to also have the support they needed to do their jobs. A lack of support was a significant influence on why two principals (104 and 109) left the principalship. Having enough support or the right kind of support was a tremendous

influence on why the six current principals (101, 102, 105, 106, 107, and 110) remained in the position. Of the principals who left, participants 103 and 108 remarked how important it was to be supported but that it was not an influence on leaving the principalship.

Compensation was seen as a type of support. About compensation, 8 of the 10 participants stated this had no influence on their decision to remain in the principal role or to leave the elementary principal role. Participant 102 stated that no one in education appeared to be getting paid fairly for the job they do; therefore, feeling underpaid was irrelevant because everyone was underpaid. Participant 105 said, "I don't give salary much thought at all as I go about my day-to-day, week-to-week, year-to-year. I'm most driven by the work because the work is so challenging." Conversely, participant 106 felt that principals were not compensated enough for their hard work and that a lack of compensation was an influence toward her future retirement. Participant 107 remarked that receiving consistent pay raises for most of her career was a positive way for the school board to communicate their support. She felt that compensation had an influence on her decision to remain a principal.

Complex job responsibilities and semistructured interviews. In interview question 3 I asked, "What aspects of your work influence (or influenced) you to remain (or move away from) being a principal?" Eight of the principals noted that the job responsibilities were the foundation for what they were called to do and influenced them to remain in the position. In general, they saw their purpose as staying committed to working with others toward student success. Participant 106 captured this when she said, "You're always ready to attend to the needs of the school and the families whenever possible." Two of the principals (104 and 109) noted that the smaller size of their campuses and the reduced availability of staff to assist the school affected their level of satisfaction for accomplishing the responsibilities of leading the school; therefore, it was an influence for leaving the role. All principals agreed that the responsibilities of leading a

campus were tremendous. From the number of responsibilities to the complexity of the responsibilities, principals spoke of the pressure that they felt while being responsible for every aspect of the school. Out of the six principals currently serving in the role, five of the six stated that working with people to help students be successful was the main aspect that influenced them to remain in the position. Participant 110 said, "I like my staff. I like supporting my staff. I like my community. I like seeing a difference in the success of students that without teachers making a difference, they wouldn't make it." Regarding the four principals who recently left the elementary principalship, half of them stated that opportunities to work with different people or larger groups of people were what influenced them to leave the elementary principalship. The other half stated that the responsibilities surrounding accountability were an influence on leaving the elementary principalship.

Principals considered accountability as part of their complex job responsibilities. All of the current principals indicated that accountability had little to no influence on them staying in the principalship. Each of the current principals had similar views about accountability as a necessary factor in educating students. Participant 106 said, "[Accountability] is supposed to help us educate our children to a higher degree of learning." Participants 101 and 105 identified the accountability system as the vehicle for measuring student growth and progress as well as key goals for their efforts as a leader in their school. Participant 105 further stated that there were many parts of the accountability system that she did not agree with but that the "core of why the system is there is for a good purpose." Participants 102 and 107 discussed that the reasons for accountability were good; however, participant 102 questioned the validity of the test and the motives for testing when he stated,

> It's not the accountability that scares you away from the profession. It's the idiocy of the test that doesn't really measure what they're saying it measure . . . it's not the fear of being held accountable. It's the fear of people using the information for ulterior motives.

Participant 107 mentioned that everyone should have some accountability because everyone's goal is for kids to achieve, but it is something she would not miss when she retires. Out of the four principals who left, two principals stated accountability was a major influence on their decision to leave. Participants 104 and 108 were principals during a time when the state deemed their campus as improvement required.

Cross-theme semistructured interview responses. In interview question 4 I asked, "What aspects are (or were) most important to you in remaining (or moving away) from being a school principal?" Two participants (101 and 103) stated that having support from the district (direct supervisor and other departments) was most important in remaining a school principal. Two participants (102 and 106) stated that the opportunity to make a difference for students and adults was most important in remaining a school principal. Four participants (105, 107, 109, and 110) said that working with others (the people they worked with, opportunities to develop the team, collaboration, and so on) was the most important to them in remaining a school principal. Principal 104 stated that the realization of not being the "right fit" for the school district influenced her to leave the position. Participant 108 said that the amount of time required to be a principal both physically and mentally wore her down and influenced her to leave the position.

The answers to interview question 5 were varied. I asked, Is there anything you feel would influence your decision (or influenced your decision) to leave the principalship? For the participants that left the elementary principalship, two of them stated that nothing would have influenced them to stay in the position. Participant 103 was undecided and participant 109 stated that the stress of community outreach and parent contacts could be something that would influence her to leave the principalship. For current principals, three participants (101, 102, and 105) stated that if their opportunities to make a difference were minimized or if they became

ineffective in their efforts, they would decide to leave. Participant 107 said that she would leave if she did not feel supported. Participants 106 and 110 mentioned their intention to retire soon. Participant 106 said that compensation was a factor in her decision and participant 110 did not give a specific influence toward future intentions or motivations.

In interview question 6 I asked, "Do you feel something, or anything could better prepare (or could have better prepared) you for continued work as a school leader?" Seven of the participants had a variety of very specific responses that included more training with special education and student behaviors, more time to collaborate with successful principals in PLCs or mentorships, training for working with the variety of personalities in a school, training about the budget, and training about the different roles and systems within the district. Three of the participants (104, 108, and 110) felt prepared to be a principal and did not specifically identify anything that would have prepared them better.

Leadership beliefs and focus group interviews. The second method for collecting responses was through focus group interviews. The participants were divided into two groups for the focused discussion. Group 1 included principals who remained in their position and group 2 consisted of principals who left their position as principal. There were seven questions discussed by the focus groups.

For focus question 5 I asked, "How do you feel about the Wallace Foundation's reply to principals being properly or improperly matched to the characteristics of the work?" From the three participants that responded, all of them felt that principals should be properly matched to the characteristics of the work but added that those characteristics may be different based on what different campuses need. Participants 104 and 109 agreed that principal placement should be deliberate in matching campus needs with leadership styles and leadership beliefs. They

further commented that the success of the campus is dependent on the investment of the principal, so it is very important to be properly matched.

Giving and getting support and focus group interviews. For the first focus group question I asked, "The video describes mentoring as key in producing capable principals. What are your thoughts about how mentorships, either formally or informally, can provide principal support?" Three participants between both groups agreed that a support system found through mentoring was helpful and necessary. Participant 102 spoke of experiences with and without a mentor. He said he felt most successful when he had people to call and the feeling of being supported. Participant 104 stated that the lack of an effective mentor can play a role in your leadership position.

In focus group question 2 I asked, "How could the intern preparation program as described in this video impact principal retention?" Five of the principals in both groups answered this question. They all agreed that programs such as these (internships) would give a potential principal the most realistic portrayal of what it was like to be a principal and would better prepare them for what they would encounter as a principal. They felt this experience and type of support would help interns understand their commitment to leadership better and therefore remain a principal longer. Participant 101 stated that the experience would allow the intern to see the real challenges a principal would face at a campus. Participant 109 said the internship program would provide support in real time and opportunities for the intern to be deliberate about their learning.

In focus group question 6 I asked, "Should principals with potential be better trained and should others be let go?" All of the participants that responded to this question agreed that training principals was key to their success regardless of their experience level. All principals need on-going training and support. Participant 103 stated that principals must continue to want

to learn and try new things. Only one participant (104) commented that a pattern of poor decisions or a pattern of the school not being where it needed to be warranted making the tough decision about letting a principal go.

For focus question 7 I asked, “In thinking about the most impactful influence on principal retention in some of the most difficult schools, of the two choices, which would you say is more motivational: a culture of allowing a principal to do their job or monetary incentives?” All of the participants, whether they were current or recently left the elementary principalship, agreed that the culture of allowing principals to do their jobs outweighed monetary incentives when addressing the biggest influence on their retention. Despite leaving the elementary principalship to lead a middle school currently designated as improvement required, Participant 109 stated that her district’s trust in her to do her job is the reason they have made some success this year. A current principal (101) stated that the culture to allow him to implement what was needed and support others at the campus was more meaningful than getting paid more.

Complex job responsibilities and focus group interviews. For focus group question 3 I asked, “The Wallace Foundation noted four key findings for what principals should do to be successful. How do you feel developing and communicating a vision for a school, supporting a culture that values education, sharing leadership with teachers, and concentrating time on improving instruction in the classroom impacts principal retention?” All of the participants who answered stated that these were completely connected and that you could not have one without the others. Participant 101 stated that communicating a vision for the school, not just in words, but through actions, would provide the foundation for everything else. Participant 104 remarked how culture and shared leadership go hand in hand. She felt that allowing all stakeholders on campus to have a voice empowers the principal to move forward in practices that make the campus successful.

In focus question 4 I asked, “Have any of these key findings personally impacted your retention in the field?” All of the principals who participated in the focus group agreed that all of these had an impact on their retention. Two principals (102 and 109) spoke of the power behind sharing leadership with teachers. They both noted how the principal alone cannot improve instruction but when the principal embraces the other people at the school by building trust and sharing leadership with them, improvement starts to happen.

Data Analysis by Theme

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed using the features in GoTo Meeting. I read each interview transcription while listening to the audio recordings to ensure that the transcripts were accurate. Verified transcripts were sent to each participant for further member checking and to strengthen validity of the data. Member checking was completed with each of the 10 one-on-one interviews. No principals requested any changes to be made. I also read the two focus group transcriptions while listening to the audio recordings to ensure that the transcriptions were accurate.

I began the coding process by using in vivo methods to identify, directly from the “participant’s own language,” key words that stood out (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 121). These words were extracted and notated. A second pass, using process coding, helped identify patterns within all of the interviews and focus groups. Data were charted into a coding matrix. I created a chart with participant responses, by question, to combine the in vivo code with the process code. The data were color coded based on the reoccurring process codes that continued to become apparent. Codes were categorized to create themes. I used the process codes to re-organize the in vivo codes and create categories. I was able to group codes into seven categories that were merged into three themes. I charted these into three columns: themes, categories, and evidence (codes). (See Appendix C for the interview response codes.) Categories related to the factors that

contribute to principals remaining in or leaving the position emerged after one-on-one interviews. They were *making a difference, pay does not matter, supporting others, feeling supported, balancing responsibilities, feeling prepared*, and *testing*. Codes and categories helped arrive at themes.

I charted student demographics from individual campuses to reflect how the ethnicity and socioeconomic status of students on a campus influenced the principal's answer to question 3e of the interview. The student demographic categories that I used were the percentage of African American, Hispanic, Caucasian, American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander, students with two or more races, and percentage of students considered economically disadvantaged, as reported in Table 2.

Findings Related to Student Demographics

In interview question 3e I specifically asked participants to describe how student diversity, as defined by ethnicity and socioeconomic status, and the needs of students influence them to remain in or leave the principalship. Student demographic data were obtained from the state's annual accountability report (TAPR) during the most recent school year of a principal's service (Table 2). Socioeconomic status was defined by the state's descriptor of economically disadvantaged, also defined as the number of students participating in the free and reduced lunch program. Participants with an asterisk indicates that they left the principalship within the last two years.

Table 2

Demographics by Participant's Campus

			Percent of Students by Demographic Subgroup							
Participant	District	Type	AA	H	C	NA	A	PI	M	ED
101	A	Urban	51.5	25.1	13.2	0.4	1.4	2.0	6.4	82.2
102	A	Urban	22.8	24.7	34.7	0.4	4.6	1.1	11.8	33.1
103*	B	Suburban	10.4	33.7	47.9	0.2	2.2	0.3	5.3	42.4
104*	C	Urban	43.9	31.4	14.8	0.0	4.3	0.0	5.7	81.0
105	A	Urban	46.4	24.1	17.7	1.1	3.2	2.6	4.9	77.5
106	C	Urban	34.3	45.4	13.6	0.2	0.8	0.0	5.7	95.3
107	A	Urban	19.1	53.9	15.2	1.0	1.6	1.8	7.4	82.2
108*	A	Urban	49.3	24.9	13.9	0.4	2.9	2.5	6.2	81.2
109*	B	Suburban	6.2	35.6	53.8	0.4	1.1	0.0	2.9	50.5
110	A	Urban	21.8	45.1	23.4	1.1	1.0	1.5	1.6	87.5

Note. AA = African American; H = Hispanic; C = Caucasian; NA = Native American; A = Asian; PI = Pacific Islander; M = Multiracial; ED = Economically Disadvantaged. The * denotes former elementary principals. Adapted from the Texas Academic Performance Report.

All of the participants led at campuses with a diverse student population regardless of their district type. Eight of the schools had 50% or more of their students classified as economically disadvantaged. Even though participants 103 and 109 left their role, their campuses were some of the least diverse with some of the lowest percentages of students who were economically disadvantaged. Participants 106 and 110 were at campuses with the most diversity and the highest percentages of students who were economically disadvantaged; however, they continued to remain in the role.

Regarding student diversity, four of the principals identified with the at-risk students at their school because they had been either an at-risk student themselves or had had significant experience teaching at-risk students. All of the principals were keenly aware of the demographics

of the students they served, and many of them had only served at-risk students. None of the principals specifically noted that student diversity was an influence on remaining in or leaving the principalship. Their expectations that all students can learn showed in their responses. Participant 104 said, “We had the highest proportion of poor students, but we made the most gains on our testing. We showed the most growth out of any school in the district.”

Participant 101 connected his reasons for being a leader to the population of students he served. His beliefs extended into the desire for all students to have the best opportunity to learn. He noted how he reminds his teachers that they must focus on the things they can control and that’s it. He believes that student needs cannot be an “excuse for not pushing students as far as they can go.” Participant 105 echoed these sentiments when she stated that she does not allow her staff to use the challenges of students that make them at-risk to be an excuse for not achieving. She models and expects others to model the mindset that “our kids, too, can do this.” Their responses reflected how student diversity enriches their beliefs about how all students can learn, which would make it an influence on them remaining in the field.

Summary

In this chapter I introduced the study with a review of the research questions that were investigated. I reviewed the processes that were used to conduct the study and provided an analysis of the one-on-one interviews, focus group experiences, and student demographic data. Furthermore, I discussed the three major themes that emerged from the investigation and indicated how the qualitative data related to the research questions. In chapter 5, I discuss the findings, describe the implications for practice, make recommendations for future research, and provide a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Principal retention has become a growing concern considering the indirect effect principals have on student achievement through their influence on people, purposes, and goals of the school, school structures and social networks, and organization culture around curriculum, instruction, and discipline (Coelli & Green, 2012; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Fuller & Young, 2009). High levels of principal turnover can disrupt the school's effort to enhance student outcomes through interactions with teachers over time (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). The purpose of this study was to identify factors that influence elementary principals to remain in the position. Two research questions guided this study:

Q1. What were the primary factors that contributed to the decision of principals to remain in the principalship?

Q2. What were the primary factors that contributed to the decision of incumbent principals to leave the elementary principalship?

This case study included analyses of data collected from elementary school principals in Central Texas who had served for at least five years or who had left the elementary principalship within the last two years. I collected the data through semistructured interviews, focus group discussions, and a review of student demographic information from the campuses represented. In vivo and process coding techniques were used to analyze the data. I identified several emerging themes that helped illustrate the factors that influenced elementary principals to remain in the field as well as the factors that led to principals to leave the elementary principalship.

In chapter 5, I present the interpretation of research findings and related recommendations. The specific implications of each of the major themes are addressed, and recommendations for action regarding principal retention are identified. I also included reflections and conclusions in the chapter.

Interpretation of the Findings

Q1. *What were the primary factors that contributed to the decision of principals to remain in the principalship?* Principals had a greater likelihood of remaining in their position when they could exercise their leadership beliefs, give and get support, and collaborate with others regarding their complex job responsibilities. The inherent need to make a difference, through their leadership role, was the strongest influence on their retention in the field for all participants. This finding was noted in their sense of duty for affecting positive change and improving student success. Their need to make a difference combined with their sense of duty defined the principals' beliefs about leadership. Participant 107 said it best when she talked about the most desirable thing about being a leader was the "change you can make."

Principals saw support as the vehicle for living out their leadership beliefs and affecting positive change. All of the participants reported needing to have the autonomy to give the support to staff members that required it and needing to get support from their district when they, as principals, required it. Every participant wove the idea of supporting their staff into the one-on-one interviews with answers to one or more of the following: what they found most desirable about the job; if their beliefs changed about leadership once they got in the role; or what aspects influence them the most to remain in the position. Participant 105 stated that she became a principal because of a "desire to help others to get better" and that the "power of collaboration" with others influenced her to remain in the position. She also reinforced the importance of getting support when she stated that

> we have to be learners in this position. We have to stay current on best practice . . . Our district is fantastic about providing us with opportunities to get that learning and then also the support and the mentorship . . . that's something that I really, really am appreciative about in this role.

The importance of receiving support was also reported in the focus group discussion. All of the principals commented on the value of mentorship programs as a form of useful support and what such support meant to them. Participant 109 connected this type of support to the future of schools when she said, “Mentorships is (sic) the key to sustainability . . . especially in low-income urban schools.”

Although having complex job responsibilities was satisfying for principals, being able to collaborate with others and share these responsibilities with other campus staff members are what most influenced principals to remain in the position. Shared or distributed leadership helps lighten the load for the principal while strengthening the school’s mission and outcomes because more hands are involved in developing the product. It is seen as a collective effort instead of something only the principal wants or is doing. Participant 106 stated, “You have to want to be an extremely hard worker to a lot of different tasks.” When discussing job responsibilities and their impact on retention, participant 102 said that the “constant change that keeps coming at you keeps you coming back.” He noted, “My number one thing on my job description is to manage change.” Individual interviews and focus group discussion reflected how principals believed that sharing leadership responsibilities with other staff affected their retention. During the focus group discussion, participant 102 stated, “I think sharing that leadership is an important thing for me personally to communicate that we’re all in this together.”

Surprisingly, compensation was not a factor that contributed to principals remaining in the position. Several principals (109, 103, 110) responded that they could be making more money by doing something else, so compensation was not a factor in being a school principal. Participant 102 summarized this best when he said, “I don’t feel like we’re getting paid what we should be getting, but it’s not a deal-breaker because it doesn’t feel like anybody’s getting paid what they deserve.”

Q2. *What were the primary factors that contributed to the decision of incumbent principals to leave the elementary principalship?* Principals were more likely to leave the elementary principalship when their leadership beliefs contradicted the values or beliefs of the districts' leaders. In other words, when district practices did not match what was communicated as the district leaders' values, principals could not connect their leadership beliefs to the misalignment. For example, participant 104 was very clear about identifying the sense of responsibility that accompanied her leadership beliefs when she said, "It was up to me make the decisions that were for the best interest of my students . . . I was the one that could make it or break it so to speak." It was especially meaningful to hear this same participant describe the most influential reason for choosing to leave the elementary principalship:

> My philosophy and the district's philosophy didn't quite align . . . I feel like once you realize that you're not the right fit, you're not who or what that particular school or district needs, that it's the mature decision to step aside and let someone else who might be a better fit take over and do what's right for those students.

Principals found it easier to leave the elementary principalship when they did not have the opportunity to adequately support the staff or receive the support they needed from their district. Participant 109 remarked, "That was a big change for me and this move was that [support] when I got to [the new district]." She spoke of systems that were in place regarding types of support she could give to her staff and types of support she could get as a principal. These supports were a welcome change to what she reported experiencing before in her old position as elementary school principal. Participant 108 reported having great support from a variety of sources due to the requirements related to leading a campus considered as improvement required. She stated it was the amount of time required in providing that support that had started wearing her down physically and mentally, which influenced her decision to leave the position. Participant 103 said receiving support from central administration was the

most important influence in her remaining a school principal even though she was moving from the elementary to secondary role. She said, “knowing I can pick up the phone and call when I’m in a sticky situation” and that “it’s okay to ask for help” were instrumental in her willingness to move positions within the same district when asked. Participant 104 worked in a smaller district with limited resources for principals. She reported, “It seemed like they [the district] were in the infancy stages of that. It was pretty frustrating the lack of support . . . the resources weren’t there.” It was part of the reason why she “came to the decision that I was not the right person for that particular school at that particular time.”

Principals were more likely to leave the elementary principalship when there was a lack of opportunity to work with others while leading the school. Participant 109 stated that

> one motivation for me to move [out of the elementary role] was to have a team around me to work and so I feel like having the team that I have here makes the job doable and it makes it attainable that I can finish those things.

Participant 104 stated that being the “ultimate problem-solver” and “not having people really take ownership and initiative for trying to help solve problems” influenced her to leave the elementary principalship. Participant 108 reported that being a principal was a “huge responsibility” because “ultimately, everything falls back on you.” She said, “It [the work] was wearing me down physically and mentally . . . I thought long and hard . . . it was time for me to go.”

As found with the principals who stayed, compensation was not a factor that contributed to incumbent principals leaving the elementary principalship. Participant 104 had left the principalship but not because of compensation. In fact, she knowingly took a pay cut to take the principal position and again when leaving the principalship. She stated, “The compensation was not a factor in it [leaving] whatsoever.”

Implications for Principal Retention

First, considering the strong association between principal retention and leadership beliefs, it is imperative for school districts to focus on a systematic process that helps select the best principal candidates with leadership beliefs that best match the district. This process can start with the school districts' screening and hiring practices such as thoughtful interview questions and opportunities for potential principals to provide evidence that exhibits their leadership beliefs in a variety of work-related contexts. Furthermore, principals must have opportunities to revisit their leadership beliefs and districts must maximize opportunities to reinforce the match between principal leadership beliefs and district beliefs. Districts should continue to discuss and reflect upon leadership beliefs during specific and purposeful experiences at ongoing training and professional development opportunities. This effort will help principals to continuously reflect on their leadership beliefs and reinforce their motivations to lead with values and beliefs of the districts' leaders. Lastly, principal evaluations should include a section related to the educator code of ethics and leadership beliefs to showcase where principals have exercised their beliefs in context of their work. Evaluation results can reinforce how principal leadership beliefs support the district leaders' values and help guide the district in strengthening the matches between principal beliefs and district leaders' values. Research suggested that high performing schools are led by principals who created a culture where learning was an essential part of everyday, where teachers collaborated regularly, and where time for reflection was regularly provided (Ash et al., 2013). These culture-building strategies emerge from principal beliefs about leadership; therefore, strategies for establishing and reinforcing leadership beliefs influence student outcomes and could help strengthen the retention of school leaders.

Second, it is expected that school districts would have high expectations for principals about the requirements for leading a campus; however, principals must have the opportunity to exercise flexibility when providing support for their staff and students. School districts must be clear in establishing and communicating nonnegotiables about leadership expectations for principals but still allow principals the autonomy to provide a variety of services and programming that meet the needs of their staff and students. These services and programming could include staffing allocations and personnel to do the work, fiscal resources for materials and supplies, access to services and training, and scheduling of time.

Not only should principals be given the authority to provide support to their staff and students, principals need to receive support from the district. Research has suggested that principals need the appropriate training and support to face the challenges of their job (Mestry, 2017). Districts should ensure purposeful practices that provide school leaders with a variety of different types of support from a plethora of departments in the district. Districts should consider creating mentoring partnerships among school principals to provide collegial support for one another. They should consider putting principals into small cadres for professional learning community groups that meet consistently for ongoing professional development, chances to collaborate, and opportunities for networking. Districts need to provide easy access to the operational departments in the district with the expectation that these departments prioritize good customer service and act responsively when working with campus leaders. Districts should maintain an organizational chart that provides school leaders with an immediate supervisor willing to offer advice, keep open lines of communication, relay important information, guide decision-making, assist in challenging situations, challenge principal thinking, coach principals toward the goals of the district, and encourage them in their work. Whether it is additional staff placed to help support the school or collegial relationships between principals, support can come

in many forms (Hansen, 2018). These opportunities for principals to give and receive support should help their retention in the field. Otherwise, research has indicated that excessive interference, lack of autonomy, reduced resources, or lack of mentoring leaves, left principals feeling dissatisfied with their role as leader (Fuller & Young, 2009).

Lastly, school districts should consider helping principals understand and implement shared leadership practices in their schools. Research has shown that principals have a variety of pressing responsibilities including personnel issues, student discipline, parent concerns, community perceptions, and ensuring academic success for all students (Huff et al., 2011). Implementing shared leadership practices can help principals with their work. This process begins with professional development and training for principals about what shared leadership practices are and how they can help principals to share the responsibility of leadership with others in the school building. Districts should help principals develop implementation plans for specific contexts where principals will begin practicing shared leadership strategies. This practice should be followed by principals observing others utilizing the strategies, receiving on-site coaching and having opportunities for principals to reflect and share about their progress with implementing these strategies. Districts should adopt the expectation for principals to continue adding more contexts where shared leadership strategies can be used so that they become stronger at using the practices. Distributed leadership reinforces a major driver for student success—school members, at all levels, becoming agents of change and taking ownership of school improvement efforts (Adams et al., 2017). Sharing responsibilities would not only help reduce some tasks for principals, it would also strengthen the buy-in and ownership for the work in the school by all stakeholders in the school.

Recommendations for Action and Further Study

There are a variety of recommendations for additional research based on the findings and limitations of this study. First, researchers might wish to expand this study to investigate the leadership perspectives of secondary principals. Secondary campuses are different from elementary campuses in many ways, such as the structure of the school day, the schedule for instruction, and the configuration of staff. Middle school and high school principals could identify factors that influence principal retention in addition to or that are different from those that were included by elementary principals.

Second, researchers should expand this study to a larger region, the state, or the United States. This study indicated findings related to factors that contribute to elementary principal retention at urban and suburban schools in Central Texas. Expanding the study to principals in other areas of the state or across the United States could significantly broaden the perspectives developed or perhaps be different from the ones shared by the elementary principals in Central Texas. Principals in other sections of the state or nation could reflect different implications for retention based on a difference in school types or student demographics.

Third, research should include another group of principals—the ones that have recently retired. Although retired principals appear to be a group that are leaving the profession as part of a natural departure, some principals are retiring early and considering employment in other positions both in and out of education. Developing an understanding of their motives for retiring early and re-entering the work force could also help explain more about factors that influence principal retention. Lastly, because leadership beliefs were shown to be a significant influence on principal retention in this study, researchers should consider digging deeper into the motivations, contributions, and perspectives that connect principals to their beliefs about leadership. When

principals and school districts can better identify their leadership beliefs, districts and principals can be better matched to accomplish the work.

Reflections

As an elementary principal for nine years, I found the topic of principal retention to be personally important. During those nine years I often asked myself what keeps me doing this work. Because of my personal reflection on this question, I felt compelled to talk with others and determine what factors kept elementary principals inclined to remain in the position. In light of the research suggesting why school leaders leave and how turnover can negatively impact student achievement, it seemed imperative to identify how to minimize turnover and strengthen retention. Strengthening retention can only begin once we know what impacts it the most.

Considering that the current principals I spoke with had all served for five or more years, six of the 10 participants had been a campus leader long enough to impact and sustain change at their school. This finding reflects the research that indicates it takes five years to apply processes and practices that will sustain school improvement and maximize leverage in sustaining schools over time through distributed or responsible leadership practices (Hull, 2012; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Stone-Johnson, 2014). These principals communicated experiences that reflected how they worked toward the long-term investment in school improvement. Their leadership beliefs were consistent with and valued by the districts where they worked. They had the opportunity to support their staff with what was needed, and the principals also received support from the district when they sought it for themselves. Ultimately, these principals were motivated to remain in their position by both the complexities of the work and the opportunity to share the work with others.

Even though four of the 10 principals I spoke to had left the elementary principalship within the last two years, they reported how their efforts toward school improvement were

minimized because of inconsistencies in the factors that influenced them to stay in the position. Their experiences indicated that it is difficult for principals to remain in the role when their beliefs about leadership contradicted those of the district where they worked. They stressed that they could not remain an elementary principal if they were not given the ability to support their staff in the way they saw fit or if they were not getting the support they needed from the district. These principals showed that they were unable to remain in the position when the complexities of their job responsibilities were more than the staff they had available to share in the work.

It was invigorating to talk with participants about their experiences in elementary school leadership. The 10 participants that I interviewed shared over 72 years of elementary leadership experience. Their passion, their challenges, and their perspectives about leadership all funneled into contextual experiences that positively affected students on a day-to-day, moment-by-moment basis. Participants were bold, honest, and transparent in their thoughts about school leadership. Their insights made me think about my own ideas regarding principal retention and provided perspectives I had not considered before. While I was well acquainted with my own beliefs about leadership, I had never considered the direct impact these beliefs had on influencing me to remain in the position. I can see now that my deeply rooted commitment to serving others and the responsibility I felt toward creating continuous improvement for students was a large part of what kept me coming back to the position year after year. The same was true about support. I saw support as a means to an end. To me, it was a simple ongoing cycle; I had to get support so that I could then give support to others. I never thought about support as a necessity for my retention, but it is clear now that it is critical in aiding the work of school leaders and strengthening leadership beliefs. Sharing complex job responsibilities was a theme that I connected with right away. As a school leader, I subscribed to shared decision-making and worked to ensure that my staff had ownership in everything we were doing for students. Sharing

job responsibilities was a major influence on my own retention as a school leader. As an elementary principal, I was both challenged and inspired by the opportunity to work with others to accomplish our goals and improve student outcomes. I was honored by the opportunity to conduct a research study about a topic that I soon learned was incredibly important to those involved. The work of these participants showed to be more than a means for making a living, but rather a calling for making a difference.

Conclusion

In this study I attempted to add to what is known about the factors that contribute to principal retention. Using a case study design, I highlighted the factors that helped elementary principals to remain in the position and the factors that led some elementary principals to leave their position. Findings from semistructured interviews, focus group interviews, and student demographic information indicated that leadership beliefs, giving and getting support, and sharing complex job responsibilities were the most important factors that influenced elementary principals to remain in the field. The results of this study suggest that districts carefully select principals with leadership beliefs that best match the values and beliefs of the districts' leaders and continue to emphasize the importance of leadership beliefs in principal work. Districts must balance high expectations with a margin of flexibility so that principals can provide the support their campus needs. Districts need to provide distinct types of support and lots of it. Lastly, districts should train principals and help them implement shared leadership strategies at their campus. The implementation of these recommendations by district administration can help maximize principal retention for the future.

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Appendix A: Qualitative Interview Protocol

Name:_____ Location:_____

Current Title:_____ Date:_____

Before the Interview:

Hello. Thank you for taking time to speak with me today. I am Carrie Parker, a doctoral student in Organizational Leadership at Abilene Christian University. The purpose of this study seeks to find how principals identify and describe the aspects that influence their leadership retention. As a former school principal, I have always been interested in what makes leaders stay in or leave the field. It is my hope that the results of my study can help positively impact the field of leadership retention.

Our interview should take less than an hour. Thank you for completing the consent form and submitting it to me. I will be taking notes throughout the interview and want to remind you that the interview is being audio recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. Your identity will remain anonymous and confidentiality will be protected at all times. This is a voluntary interview and you can decide to stop the interview at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview:

1. Please state your name, current position, and a brief description of what your position entails.
    a. How long have you served in this position?
2. Please describe the point in which you decided you wanted to become a principal.
    a. What is desirable about this job?
    b. Did the job turn out to be what you anticipated? If so or if not, how?
    c. Have there been any surprises while serving as principal?
    d. Have your beliefs about leadership changed since your first year in the role?
3. What aspects of your work influence/influenced you to remain/move away from being a principal?
    a. You mentioned XXXX, can you provide an example of that?
    b. How does compensation, as defined by salary, influence you to remain in the position?
    c. How does accountability, as defined by expectations for student achievement, influence you to remain in the position?
    d. How do job responsibilities influence you to remain in the position?
    e. How does student diversity, as defined by ethnicity and socioeconomic status, and the needs of students influence you to remain in the position?
    f. How does support, as defined by training, professional development, or mentoring, from the district influence you to remain in the position?
4. What aspects are/were most important to you in remaining/moving away from being a school principal?

5. Is there anything you feel would influence your decision/influenced your decision to leave the principal position?
6. Do you feel something or anything could/could have better prepare/prepared you for continued work as a school leader?
7. This concludes the questions I wanted to ask today. Is there anything you would like to add regarding principal retention?

Closing the interview:

Just a reminder that your responses from today will remain confidential. Transcripts from our time together will be sent to you so that you can check for accuracy in our conversation. Thank you for speaking with me today.

Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

1. The video describes mentoring as key in producing capable principals. What are your thoughts about how mentorships (formally or informally) can provide principals with support?

2. How could the intern preparation programs, as described in the video, impact principal retention?

3. The Wallace Foundation noted four key findings for what principals should do to be successful. How do you feel developing and communicating a vision for a school, supporting a culture that values education, sharing leadership with teachers, and concentrating time on improving instruction in the classroom impacts principal retention?

4. Have any of these key findings personally impacted your retention in the field?

5. How do you feel about the Wallace Foundation's reply to principals being properly or improperly matched to the characteristics of the work?

6. Should principals with potential be better trained and should others be let go?

7. In thinking about the most impactful influence on principal retention in some of the most difficult schools, of the two choices, which would you say is more motivational: a culture of allowing a principal to do their job or monetary incentives?

Appendix C: Interview Response Codes

Leadership Beliefs	Wanting to make a difference	• kids and teachers • invest • want • dig deep • obligation to all kids • impact • up to me • basis of all decisions • ensure learning • improve teaching and learning • make a difference • break the cycle • moral compass • called to serve • global change • expand my control • can't be an excuse • make a difference • lead by example
	Getting paid doesn't matter	• doesn't motivate • not a huge thing • cut in pay • nothing to do with it • haven't given it much thought • more motivated by the work • not a reason at all • not a deal breaker
Giving and getting support	Supporting others	• developing teachers • relationships • see all sides • servant leader • help others • collaboration • assisting families • teachers need help/support • supporting and building them • bank people's trust • working with people • other professionals • not as easy to influence • helping adults • what we can control • helping them do their jobs better

(chart continues)

Giving and getting support	Feeling supported (or not) Feeling supported (or not)	• huge difference • big deal • huge deal • investing • support from admin • lack of support • resources not there • great opportunities • feel supported • strong • PD, training, staffing • network • helpful • district influence important • have your back • constraints • relationship with the district • supported by pay raise • what does district do to value people • didn't have/feel support
Complex Job Responsibilities	Balancing responsibilities	• responsibility • keeping up • work out • teacher buy in • difficult • wearing • team • huge responsibility • distractors • every single day • stay focused • all consuming • so many responsibilities • quick on your feet • a lot of different tasks • full time • 24/7 • thrive on it • have to make it work • duties more important • complex • do more to utilize teacher leaders • constant change keeps you coming back
	Feeling prepared	• felt prepared • experiences trained me

(chart continues)

Complex Job Responsibilities	Testing	• necessary evil • student growth • fuzzy math • just one piece • huge role in decision to leave • find that balance • desired results is growth • parts I don't agree with • there for a good purpose • keeps us on track • system is hard • equal across the board • won't miss it when I retire • no fear of being held accountable • fear of using results with ulterior motives

Appendix D: IRB Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

February 21, 2019

Carrie Parker

Dear Carrie,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Principal Retention: Why Do Leaders Stay?"

(IRB# 19-012)is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs